

Tendencies of Inner Surveillance in Democratic India: Challenges of Establishing Native Ethnographer's Identity Among Indian Muslims

By Tabassum "Ruhi" Khan

Abstract

The paper analyzes how the native ethnographer's position within his/her community becomes problematized during fieldwork conditions defined by fear of state surveillance forces. It focuses on the way state's vigilance activities create new barriers for establishing of native ethnographer's authority by challenging the ethnographer's privileged access to his/her research community based on trust and cultural/religious affiliations. The apprehensions for personal safety experienced by the informants unsettle the distinctions between native and non-native ethnography. The paper argues that if anthropology is to progress as a meaningful social and cultural critique then it must elaborate the ethnographer's experiences of navigating the shifting grounds as insider and outsider. It proposes a "thick description" of the way reticence and distrust of the informants is overcome. The aim is to create scholarship that counters political and social injustices by making explicit voids and gaps and by gleaning a wealth of information in silences.

Keywords: Native ethnography, surveillance, Muslims, India

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This paper further confounds the native anthropologist's claims to authority based on cultural, social and historical affiliations with the subject population by situating this problematic within the context of surveillance societies. Native anthropologists are considered best situated to present an unbiased and accurate picture of a community because as members they have access to realms of everyday life structured by language, practices, and ideology that would be denied to other non-members (Bourdieu 1977). Their authority is buttressed by arguments that knowledge is historically, culturally, and socially situated and influenced by conditions and relationships of production (Altorki & El-Solh 1988; Clifford 1986; Marcus & Fishcer 1999). But, the privileged stance of insider ethnography is also called into question on grounds that no society is homogenous. Rather, as differences of class, education, and social mobility define every culture, internal differences qualify whether native ethnographers represent the most just and authentic view of their communities (Aguilar 1981; Corbin & Buckle 2009; Ganiel & Mitchell 2006; Messerschmidt 1981; Narayan 1993). When I approached my fellow Muslims residing in the exclusive Muslim enclave of Jamia Nagar, New Delhi, to investigate the emerging identity of Muslim youth born in the globalized/liberalized Indian society, I was well aware of these counter arguments. I was also sensitive to the way differences of class, education and social mobility could influence my interactions. However, the timing of my entry in to the field and my subsequent experiences in approaching my informants made me realize that a community's internal dialogues, (in this case between me and the Muslim youth), are not only structured by internal differences or points of convergence but are also dependent on the community's external dialogues. For example, ambivalent relationships with the state that subject communities to practices of state surveillance can heighten the sense of misgivings among the populations, creating new barriers and challenges for establishing of the native ethnographer's authority. My experiences drew attention to the little explored dimension that in fieldwork contexts of increased state vigilance a native ethnographer's privileges and problems of access are not static but have to be constantly and dynamically renegotiated.

The fieldwork was conducted in the Muslim enclave of Jamia Nagar, which has been historically constructed as a distinct living space. The Muslims, who became a minority community in India following the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 into India and Pakistan, have tended to withdraw into such urban segregated living spaces, because they were cold shouldered by the Indian state and regarded with mistrust by the majority Hindu population (Hasan 2002 & 1997; Sachar Committee 2006). The Muslims residents of the well demarcated and differentiated enclave of Jamia Nagar maintain a certain mental distance from the outside

world and harbor a sense of apprehension towards the Hindu population. However, in the summer of 2007, the bombings in Glasgow, UK and other events pushed their relative isolation almost to the brink of social ostracism. In the aftermath of Glasgow terror the entire Muslim population was being framed by media discourses and state actions as being potential suspects. The crisis was particularly severe as for the first time even the small population of middle class educated and other wise upwardly mobile Indian Muslims, who have attempted to participate actively in Indian society, and who had not been hitherto considered to be disaffected (unlike the poor and disposed Muslim living in ghettos), were drawn into a global terror plot. The leading Indian dailies, especially *The Times of India*, were openly suggesting that the loyalty of all Indian Muslims to India was now suspect and that the government should treat the minority Muslim community in India with circumspection (see Swami 2007).

The discourses circulating in the Indian public sphere, resurrecting the specter of suspicion and state surveillance over its Muslim citizens, posed a unique problem for the native ethnographer. While on the one hand, my informants, as residents of segregated Muslim neighborhood or ghetto, were feeling particularly fearful of state scrutiny, and were responding to the situation with a heightened sense of inner vigilance or a reverse surveillance and they were becoming inaccessible to me. And on the other hand, even though it was becoming difficult to gain my informants' trust, my sense of identification with my subjects' predilection was sharpening. The general impressions that even the educated and more integrated Muslims were not above suspicion allowed me to keenly feel the sense of persecution experienced by the more disadvantaged Muslims. In this paper, I argue that the external events complicated my insider status and influenced the dynamics of interactions to an extent not accounted for by critics of insider/outsider dichotomy in anthropology. Most researchers have explored how a community's structure, internal dynamics and differences problematize the definitions of insider and outsider ethnography and proposed that ethnographers occupy a continuum of space between the insider and the outsider (Aguilar 1981; Corbin & Buckle 2009; Ganiel & Mitchell 2006; Narayan 1993; Sherif 2001). However, few have looked at how the larger social and political contexts within which the community exists alter the internal relationships between the native ethnographer and the research subjects.

This essay is an account of the way my credibility as a native ethnographer was negotiated in a situation when socio-political conditions were damaging the community's internal cohesiveness. It explores the issue of accessibility, based on cultural affiliations and trust, that lies at the heart of the divide between native and non-native anthropologists at a point of time when the community members and research subjects were caught in the middle of a political storm and feared the shadow of the state's vigilant forces. According to Green (1995) fear and suspicion are corrosive elements that destabilize social relations. My informants ac-

cepted me as a member of the Muslim community, but not as someone whom they could trust. The boundaries between insiders and outsiders in anthropological research became blurred and difficult to define. These experiences call for a shifting of the debate from the analysis of distinctions between native and non-native ethnographers to the process of establishing the ethnographer's authority. The focus needs to be on how essential differences of class and education are negotiated, and the way hindrances created by lack of trust in a hostile political ambience are overcome. I propose a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of what Murphy (1999) refers to as "productive discomforts of field encounters". The approach is evocative of the critiques of traditional ethnography, which stressed the need to accommodate and explore power dynamics shaping the research frameworks in order to create a more critical anthropology (Clifford 1986; Marcus & Fischer 1999). The thrust of my argument is that if anthropology is to progress as a meaningful social and cultural critique, which promotes mutual awareness, diversity and tolerance (see Marcus & Fischer 1999), then ethnographies of contexts of fear, hostilities, and/or suspension of democratic rights must revert to "thick descriptions" of the silences that engulf research subjects and suppress their voices. The scholarship of making explicit the politics of voids and gaps will be ethnography's contribution to countering political and social injustices.

This paper begins with a description of the discourses circulating in the Indian public sphere that describe and stereotype Indian Muslims following the suicide attack at Glasgow airport in the summer of 2007. These accounts have been reconstructed primarily from the writings of leading columnists of mainstream Indian newspapers, especially the largest selling English language dailies like *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*. A broad assessment of content of other popular media outlets has also been attempted. The elaboration of discourses that heightened the sense of insecurities among the community are juxtaposed with the native ethnographer's report of establishing her researcher's credibility by negotiating differences and hurdles created by research subjects' apprehensions and their reluctance to compromise their safety in conditions of increased state surveillance. The paper concludes with several reflections on ethnographic research. It proposes that if ethnographical accounts are but one among competing systems of representation (see Marcus & Fischer 1999), then contemporary ethnography may benefit by focusing on the dialogic between different systems of representation especially between the prevalent dominant discourses (including the mediated) and the almost inaudible assertions of minorities and/or marginalized populations as has been attempted in this paper.

Rhetoric of Terror and the Position of Indian Muslims

I was barely a week into my field research in the segregated Muslim enclave of Jamia Nagar, in New Delhi, when news reports of an attempt to bomb Glasgow

airport first surfaced. The *Times of India* carried the story on July 1st 2007 next to the story of annual flooding of Mumbai. The center inset of cars floating in monsoon floodwaters dwarfed the news of the failed attempt to blow-up Glasgow airport. However, in the next four weeks this story along with the coverage of the arrest of an Indian Muslim doctor in Australia, the siege of the Lal Masjid by fundamentalists in Pakistan, and the trials of Muslim perpetrators of 1993 serial blasts in Mumbai would dominate Indian news media. The images ricocheted off television screens, Internet, and front pages of newspapers and the Muslim citizens of India found themselves, in the words of Ather Farouqi (2007), caught between “increasingly strident anti-Muslim propaganda” and “the equally strident fervour of jihadi Muslims”. The shrillness of the twin discourses left little room for doubt that Islam existed only with reference to global terror.

As an Indian citizen, a Muslim, and an academic I attempt to deconstruct the major themes or frames that emerged in the news reports on Indian Muslims. I believe that the most significant frame was the twist or the unexpected element in the story of Glasgow airport bombing created by the involvement of a middle class Muslim youth in the Glasgow attack. The columnist of *The Times of India* argued that this would be the final straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back (Roshan Lal 2007, July 9). According to Kodkani (2007), Roshan Lal (2007), and Swami (2007), the involvement of middle class Muslims from the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore had rescinded the old stereotypes that only the poor and dispossessed Muslims were prone to disaffection and involvement in terrorist activities. These journalists implied that after Glasgow no Indian Muslim could be considered as being above suspicion and they called for a reassessment of the general impressions about Indian Muslims as a community. Roshan Lal (2007, July 8) writes in almost hysterical terms, “suspend the disbelief and suck back the collective gasp of horror at the emerging profile of the modern Muslim terrorist—average age 26; married; middle-class; white-collar professional” (A.8). Every day the newspapers carried speculative reports about the antecedents of the middle class Muslim youths from Bangalore who had taken the nation by surprise. The columnists and journalists, in their collective horrified endeavor, dissected the history, the lifestyle, and the beliefs of the Muslim professionals who had taken to the path of terror. They juxtaposed photographs of their very ordinary Indian faces with headlines such as “New faces of terror” and insets such as “upper class and upwardly mobile in Britain’s terror plot” to express their outrage at duplicity of Indian Muslims.

Even as the media expostulated, the main accused lay unconscious in a UK hospital with 90% burns on his body, and the UK and Australian governments did not allow access to the other accused. Hence, the media did not have access to the point of view of those accused in the Glasgow bombing, but this did not prevent the media from speculating. Headlines like “Kafeel quit dream job for *jihad*?”, “New-age terrorists is a techie to boot”, and “Rushdie knighthood last straw?”

were wild conjectures about the circumstances and the ideological leanings that prompted the actions of those implicated in the bombing (see Jayaprakash & Kumar 2007, July 10 & July 11; and Shiv Kumar, Jayaprakash & Ambarish, July 12). The problem with this inept journalism was not only that they were passing assumptions as truth, but they were also insinuating that the entire Indian middle class Muslim population shared the mindset of the accused. The Indian Muslims had clearly become “India’s new untouchables” (Nomani 2008).

The other frame that emerged from this irresponsible and highly emotional reporting was the argument rationalizing the need for increased surveillance of Indian Muslims (see Raman 2007; Swami 2007). According to Swami (2007), “the global jihad might have deeper roots in the India than most people ever imagined” (A 10). Supporting this stance, Raman added that it was clear to him that the Muslim professionals implicated in the terror plot were not dupes of Al-Qaida, but were eager and willing participants. The arguments that discredited Indian Muslims gained support from incidences of negative profiling of Muslims in the West where their actions were seen as “‘suspicious’ which required ‘urgent preventive actions’” (see “Dutch deny” 2007, A 7). The lack of faith in the Muslim position was highlighted even in sympathetic newspaper reports such as Prakash’s (2007), which provided space to the parents of the accused to speak and share their experiences of how they had tried to draw their son away from his fanatical leanings. However, the unconvincing tone of the report and inset photographs of the parents in their very traditional Islamic attire (the father was wearing a flowing beard and the mother was dressed in a veil) sent out contradictory messages and sealed the impression that no sympathy need be shown to Indian Muslims as they were obviously so different from the rest of the Indian population (see Jayaprakash & Kumar 2007; Prakash 2007).

The hostility towards Muslims was palpable in the editorial of *The Times of India* on July 9, 2007. It severely rebuked the Indian Prime Minister for his statement of two years previous, where he had expressed his faith in Indian Muslims. Dr. Manmohan Singh had stated that Indian Muslims were well integrated and they had steered clear of the extremist philosophy of groups such as the Al Qaida. The editorial denounced his view in no uncertain terms and also upbraided the Prime Minister for expressing his sympathy toward the distraught mother of young Muslim doctor, Haneef, who had been arrested in Australia as a suspect in the Glasgow bombing on the basis weak and circumstantial evidence. The Prime Minister had said that he was deeply disturbed by this development, and that he, as a member of the Sikh minority community, well understood the pain of being labeled. The criticism of the Prime Minister’s compassion for the Muslim community was worded as an oblique query in the editorial, “Why are so many terrorist Muslims, even as most Muslims are not terrorist?”(A16).

The frames adopted by the columnists associating Indian Muslims and terrorism were bolstered by parallel and simultaneous world events, especially the stand-off

between fundamentalists and the Pakistani army at the Lal Masjid in Islamabad and the trial of the Mumbai serial blast accused in Mumbai. In the last week of June 2007, Islamic fundamentalist had laid siege to the mosque in Islamabad and challenged the authority of the Pakistan Government. The bitter battle that ensued between hardliners and the Pakistani state was covered by the world media. The unfolding of the hostilities exposed the dangers posed by extremist Islam to states and also vindicated the strong-arm tactics of the Pakistan Government (see Mehkri & Agencies 2007). While, the coverage of the trials of the Mumbai serial blast accused was much closer home and had greater significance for Indian Muslims. In 1993, Mumbai the financial capital of India, was hit by a series of blasts that took hundreds of lives and destroyed property worth millions of Indian rupees. The blasts followed the demolition of a historic mosque (The *Babri Masjid*) and the massacre of Indian Muslims in the senseless violence of communal riots in December 1992. In July 2007, it was extremely ironic for Indian Muslims to observe that the Muslim accused in the Mumbai blasts had been brought to trial and served severe sentences, including the death penalty (see Deshpande 2007b). However, none of those who had incited and committed violence against Muslims (including senior members of Hindu right wing nationalist party) were apprehended or punished with the same vigor. Jyoti Punwani (2007) writes, “these double standards are now part of being a Muslim in India’s ‘vibrant’ democracy”. The front page article in *The Times of India* with a picture of Yakub Memom’s weeping wife had headlines that read “Justice at home and away” (see Deshpande 2007a). Yakub Memon had surrendered to the Indian Government hoping for a fair trial, but was awarded a death penalty (see, Balakrishnan 2007). The message that went out to Indian Muslims in the light of these developments and their coverage in media was that their transgressions would be severely reprimanded. The Indian state was wary of them and watched them carefully.

Problems of Establishing Ethnographic Authority

In the atmosphere of gloom, disaffection and distrust, the segregated neighborhood that I was approaching posed unique problems of familiarity and distance. I had assumed that since my association with Jamia Nagar area went back to the time when I was a student at Jamia University (situated in the heart of the enclave), I could go back and reclaim my old ties and connections. The Jamia area has grown around the Jamia Millia Islamia University, which was established as a Muslim educational society in 1920s. Though today Jamia University is no longer a Muslim minority institute but a Central University, funded by the federal government in India, the university continues to attract Muslim migrants to the area as the Arabic nomenclature of Jamia Millia Islamia gives them false hope of securing admission.¹ The Muslim population of Jamia Nagar has continued to grow despite the fact that there are few Muslims enrolled in the premium courses like

engineering, architecture, or media arts because as members of a marginalized and impoverished minority population they are unable to meet the rigorous admission standards of a premier University.

However, I graduated from the respected media program at Jamia University and was also employed as a Producer of Educational Television and this gave me a certain credibility within the community. And though my ties had been severed when I moved to the United States for higher education, I believed I could reestablish my links with my acquaintances and colleagues even after a gap of nearly ten years by calling on my warm and cordial relationships. Moreover, as a Muslim who spoke fluent Urdu, and like most members of Jamia University and of the Jamia residential area I ascribed to north Indian Muslim cultural ethos, I was certain that I would have few problems in gaining access to Muslim youth. But, the events in Glasgow and Australia strained my former bonds and falsified my assumptions of assured access.

In the wake of the bombing in Glasgow, an amorphous, indescribable sense of dejection seemed to be engulfing the entire Indian Muslim community. I believe that the sense of fear was compounded in the wake of Haneef's, the young Muslim doctor, arrest in Australia. The only evidence that the Australian government had against the 26 year old Haneef was that the SIM card of his cell-phone (the one he had used in England before migrating to Australia) was found with his cousin Sabeer. Sabeer's older brother had been the Glasgow bomber. The Australian authorities treated Haneef as an extremely dangerous suspect and kept him under solitary confinement. The act of generosity towards his extended family had jeopardized Haneef's life and career, and it also sent out a powerful message to other Indian Muslims. The message emerging from the mishap was that we Muslims must be cautious even in our personal associations as our harmless acts and ties could become suspect at any moment. The writing on the wall was that there was no guarantee of our civil liberties and this introduced an element of uncertainty and negativity in our daily lives.

I believe that the apprehensions that engulfed Indian Muslims were unlike the fears that overcame the community during the communal riots in 1992. The violence that followed the destruction of the disputed mosque by Hindu radicals in December 1992 had instilled a deep fear of physical violence, but the insecurities that plagued Muslim in the summer of 2007 were not associated with physical threat to life; rather, Haneef's detainment in Australia signified the extreme precariousness of our future and our aspirations. Linda Green (1995) says that fear is not just a response to danger, but also the silent and invisible arbiter of power. The dejection and anxiety that we felt were signs of our utter helplessness and lack of power. There are few Muslims in the higher education stream because as mentioned earlier it is not easy for members of an economically and socially backward community to succeed in the extremely competitive Indian educational system. Haneef's achievements were exceptional. He not only trained as a physi-

cian in India, but also qualified to do his residency at hospitals in the UK and Australia. Nonetheless, the fact that he could be arrested and regarded as a terrorist on account of his religious affiliation, and that his life and career be destroyed, implied that the chances for social inclusion of Muslims through increased participation in the workforce were slim. I believe that we as Muslims feared the prospect of our continued economic and social disempowerment. Our anxieties were about the number of doors that could be closing on us due to our religion and the stereotypes that defined us.

I count myself as being more privileged educationally than my informants at Jamia University; but we were all plagued by the same sense of unease. I shared with my informants the consciousness of the intense scrutiny that had come to bear on Indian Muslims. In addition to the profiling of all Muslims as potential terrorists, they were also being labeled as a liability to the country and as a spoke in the wheel of its progress (see Karkaria 2007; Roshan Lal 2007). Roshan Lal (2007) writes that in the firmament of shinning India, Muslims like Kafeel represented “the dark side of the moon” (A11). Their actions had jeopardized the prospects of India and Indians in the international economic sphere (see Roshan Lal 2007). As a middle class Muslim I paid special attention to these reports and was very conscious of how their presumptions could damage our chances of employment and participation as equal citizens in the economic growth of the country. I believe that the news reports that indicted Indian Muslims for jeopardizing India’s growth prospects were more effective in further isolating the Muslim community from mainstream Indian society than the other discussions on terror. I deeply empathized with the anxieties of my informants—young men and women of the segregated Muslim enclave who were on the threshold of their careers. The scrutiny that they would be exposed to when they went for job interviews would not be very different from the careful inspection of my person at different airports of the world as I crossed over to my space in the Western academia. I, too, feared the glances, the looks, the raised eyebrows, the careful appraisals of travel documents, and the possible hostility that the mere mention of my name may evoke. I imagined that all of us were united by shared sentiments of insecurity and alienation. However, as I progressed with my fieldwork my assumptions of solidarity based on our common concerns were soon exposed as fallacious because the shadow of state surveillance intensified our differences to an unanticipated extent.

Questions of Class and the Assumptions of the Ethnographer

Class affiliations have played a primary role in structuring the relationships of the different strata of the Muslim population with the Indian state and the political order. As mentioned earlier, Indian Muslims who are financially and educationally lacking are seen as more prone to being disloyalty to the Indian state (see Hasan 2004; “New age terrorist,” 2007). Their congested neighborhoods, segregated enclaves and ghettos are under covert state surveillance and the residents believe

the state's vigilant activities become more pervasive during conditions suffused with disaffection towards Islam (see Sultana 2006). However, the more educated and upper middle-class Muslims are often spared the state's intrusion into their lives. Hence, in this situation of compounded ill will towards Muslims, the fact that my informants lived in an exclusively Muslim domain, and I lived outside, became crucial in defining my positionality as a native ethnographer. The condition of my residence in close vicinity to Jamia, though not in Jamia enclave, had never been a qualifying factor in my relationships with my friends and colleagues who lived there. Nor had it influenced the research routine in my previous trip when I interacted with the Muslim youth to select my key informants. However, the task of reestablishing contact and recruiting informants in an ambience of intense scrutiny of Indian Muslims taxed my facilities as a native ethnographer. I could not rely on religious and cultural affiliations to secure access to my informants,

My informants were wary. It was difficult to approach them. I would call to fix a time to meet but often they would not pick up the phone, or not return my call, or forget to keep the appointment. I understood that they were exercising caution. Nobody seemed to know whom to trust. I, as a researcher, studying at an American university was definitely suspect. A family acquaintance openly stated that they were unsure whose agenda a researcher affiliated with an American university was fulfilling. The tension between us was palpable across the barriers of silence that they erected against me. Indeed, my mother's strong opposition to my research reinforced the fact that my informants and I were facing each other across a very wide chasm. My mother not only constantly rebuked me for my interest in the state of affairs of Muslims, but she also went so far as to state "look at how they are hated, why do you want to get involved" (personal communication June, 23, 2007). She said over and over again that I should change my research topic. She feared for my safety, and once the event in Glasgow unfolded she became adamant in her opposition. According to her, my association with Muslims, no matter how innocuous, would bring harm to my life and my career in the same tortuous manner as Haneef had been hurt. She added that since I was interested in studying minorities and their interactions with media, why could I not chose to study Christians or any other minority in India. Why did I need to focus on Muslims who were distrusted and targeted by the state? It was difficult to explain to her that this was precisely the reason why I wished to document the experiences of Indian Muslims.

Green (1995) writes that, "fear divides communities through suspicion and apprehension, not only of strangers, but of each other" (105). My mother's nervous state and her references to ambiguous fearful scenarios gave me a better insight into the conditions faced by my informants. Her reactions removed the dullness of vision that my absence from India may have engendered. I became conscious of the acuteness of the anxieties experienced by the Muslim population. According

to Sultana (2006), the mothers of the Jamia spend sleepless nights whenever there is an incident of violence anywhere in India. They worry when and if the police will descend on their doorsteps and detain or confine their children. My mother's apprehensions reminded me of the insecurities of these mothers. I completely identified with my informants' circumstances even as I recognized the privileges of my relatively secure upper middle class status, and I vacillated between my position as an insider and an outsider. My position was ambiguous and my claims as being an insider were made even more tenuous by the guarded reactions of my informants. But regardless of the dilemma of how to define my approach, the task was to overcome barriers and establish contact with the key informants.

Overcoming Silences and Listening through Cracks

I had to wait two weeks before I could get a response to my emails, my text messages, and my repeated phone calls. Finally, more than a fortnight after the bombing in Glasgow, I got a phone call from Faisal and Fahim. They apologized that they had been busy at work and had been unable to return my several messages. I did not insist nor express any urgency in setting up a meeting. Instead, I casually mentioned that I was going to a coffee house close to my house in the evening, and they were welcome to join me if they had the time. I was pleasantly surprised that both of them decided to turn up.

The conversation that I am about to describe is an example of how the ethnographer's personal involvement in the ethnography problematizes the question of objectivity and subjectivity in the encounter in a way that it becomes difficult to state whether one is an insider or an outsider, an observer or a participant (see Winkler & Hanke 1995). My intention was to understand my informants' reactions to the events, yet the events affected me equally. Hence, I was an observer and a participant. My task was to analyze my informants' perspectives, while being highly conscious of my own reactions. I also struggled to be aware of my shifting position, moving rapidly from the privileged insider's perspective to that of an outsider, influenced not only by our differences in education, experiences, age and gender, but also by the world events in which we were inadvertently embroiled.

Fahim and Faisal turned up sooner than I expected. I did not dwell over why they had not returned my calls for two weeks. It was the 17th of July, and in the previous two weeks the newspapers had focused on little else but the incident in Glasgow and its various fallouts. As we sat around sipping our drinks and conversing, I could not help but be conscious of how we avoided any mention of the issue that was capturing news headlines and generating a heated debate in Indian media and society. We talked about everything and anything. We discussed at length the SMS (or text messaging) campaign to include Taj Mahal among the eight wonders of world. We discussed the complicity of mobile phone companies

to make money by playing on nationalist sentiments. Faisal confided that he had lost so much money because the phone companies had not declared the terms for casting the vote clearly. We continued to talk about other such innocuous matters and avoided and hedged around the one event that deeply troubled us.

The circuitous dance of our conversation indicated that each one of us was too afraid to trust the other. Green (1995) says that anthropologists working on the battlefield often find it difficult to describe in words the intense and pervasive fear that they experience. It was impossible for me to pin down the gnawing unease that each one of us was experiencing and to describe the awareness that each one of us had of how the other was feeling. Moreover, everyone of us tacitly understood that we were not saying what we wanted to say, and in full awareness of the deception that we were practicing, we continued with our charade of polite banter. My informants were familiar with my research interests in media discourses and in the ways minority populations, especially Muslims, were interacting with them. But referring to media coverage of the current events would mean expressing their apprehensions and their politics. They were not sure if they could be honest with me. While my situation was that though I was committed to my research, my mother's fears were resonating within me. I was gauging my respondents. I was being careful with my words and I was dithering between not endangering myself and not saying anything that would make my informants suspicious of my intentions.

At last, the tension became too much for me. After an hour and more of coffee, ice-cream, and meandering discussions, I, very obliquely, in very few words, in a very public place, said very quietly, "Look at what is happening around us". This was a cue for a dam to burst. Suddenly we were on the same wavelength and talking about something that we all felt strongly about. Faisal responded equally quietly, "*Karta koi hai bharta koi hai*" [Someone else's misdeeds and someone else has to bear the consequences]. He was saying that Kafeel's actions had endangered the future of the whole community. Fahim added, "*Agar yahan naukri karni hai to bahut sabar se*" [If you want to work here, earn a living, then you must exercise a lot of patience]. Faisal responded by uttering almost under his breath, "*Sabar, sabar*" [Patience, patience] (personal communication, July 17, 2007). In a few words they told me the complete story. These young men were concerned about their job prospects and were anxious that their religious identity would make the going difficult for them. They immediately identified with Haneef's problems. And I could absolutely understand their viewpoint, as I did not know how my Islamic name would affect my future opportunities even though my circumstances as a Muslim scholar in Western academia were different from the Muslim job applicants in India.

Despite the fact that we had finally connected, that a degree of mutual trust had developed among us, and that we had overcome internal barriers, we could not talk about the issue that affected us at length. We could not say beyond a few

words about what weighed so heavily on our minds. We communicated our worries silently. In the two hours of our conversation no more than these few words were exchanged about a matter that was a question of our lives. The fear and power of surveillance hung over us. Nonetheless, I do think, that this was one of the moments when my research subjects and I were in a state of total communication. It was a moment when I could unequivocally lay claim to my identity as an insider. We did not need words. I knew without a doubt that they knew I identified with their plight. And my informants understood without any explanation my own fears and apprehensions. Despite our differences we were all acutely aware of our common identity as Indian Muslims, as a minority community, and as a people who were marginalized in the larger public sphere. Our self restraint, our decision not to dwell on our anguish in a public space expressed our mutual understanding to not draw attention to our identity as Muslims and to not jeopardize ourselves in any way. For example, all of us knew that if we discussed the arrest of Haneef or the events in Glasgow loudly enough for other people in the coffee house to overhear us, we would definitely draw quizzical gazes at the very least. These glances, even if they were without the potential of hostility or physical harm, would set us apart from other Indians, and alienate us further. We all knew and agreed that there were limitations on how far we could express ourselves.

This conversation filled with pauses, silences, and gaps is actually brimming with information. However, such voids are usually not accommodated in the more conventional representations. For example, media will not dwell on why some of the people interviewed refused to comment. The silence will either not be referred to or will be reported as “no comment”. But, as an ethnographer I had to dissect their reticence. My first conceptual leap was to realize that my informants’ silences did not indicate that they saw me as an outsider. However, working in conditions of fear and suspicion entailed that I would not have complete access to my informants. Despite the communion between us, I had to deal with the fact that a certain distance would be placed between the young men of Jamia and me. The strategies of state surveillance are ambiguous and in the extreme uncertainty that surrounded us it was difficult for me to ascertain how the young men of Jamia may be affected if they freely voiced their opinions. My duty as an insider and an ethnographer (as compared to a reporter or a journalist) was to protect my informants from incriminating themselves in any fashion. The constraints created by the surveillance society entailed that I had to find a way of addressing the core concern of my research, and to understand the way dominant mediated discourses were imbricated in the consciousness of minority populations, in a potentially less harmful but effective manner.

Discretions, Indirectness and Elusiveness in Ethnographic Research

The opportunity to raise the many contentious issues concerning the Indian Muslim identity without actually talking about them in a society, which was chary of

acknowledging the distinct Muslim identity and harbored misgivings about their sincerity, was provided by a Bollywood film *Chak De India* released in August 2007. The unique aspect of the film was not that the Muslim superstar Shahrukh Khan played the lead but that for the very first time in his two-decade long career, Shahrukh Khan played a Muslim character, Kabir Khan. And as Kabir Khan he explored the complexities of being a Muslim in independent, democratic India. This media text defied the norm of marginalization and symbolic annihilation of Muslims in the Indian public sphere by resurrecting their identity in full public glare. Naturally, the film struck a chord with the Muslim youth, and they eagerly anticipated its release. For me, the ethnographer, the film *Chak De India* became the focal and non-controversial talking point to initiate a conversation with Muslim youth about their identity and the issues that perpetuate their isolation.

I encountered few silences when I opened the conversation with a question like, “what did you think of the film *Chak De India*” or “what was the main theme of the film?” The film centers around the character Kabir Khan, who in a crucial match against Pakistan, India’s Muslim neighbor, fails to strike the penalty goal. His failure is not considered a vagary of the game because Kabir Khan is a Muslim. Instead, it is considered to be a deliberate and devious act to help the opposing team and his co-religionists win the match. Kabir Khan is branded a traitor. He retreats from public life and returns only to take up the job of training the rag-tag women’s hockey team that nobody else considered worthwhile. However, for Kabir Khan it is a chance to redeem his lost reputation, and he stakes everything that he has to help the team win the women’s world cup and is thereafter able to reinstate himself in public life.

In my conversations with my informants, I would begin with an inoffensive question about the lead character. In the course of our conversation when we would discuss Kabir’s dilemma, I would ask pointed questions such as, “Did you agree with the film’s depiction of the problems of Indian Muslims?” and “Is the film’s treatment of the discomfort that we Muslims experience realistic?” I could read in their non-controversial answers a wealth of information, because as they discussed Kabir’s situation, they were actually reflecting on their own. For example, Rehman, my informant who more closely represents the opinions of the upper class Muslims, responded to my queries as, “We do get a chance but there is a struggle involved, which is not very evident. . . . Just as in the movie, a small mistake creates a lot of finger pointing” (personal communication, March 15, 2008). According to Rehman, Muslims in their everyday life encounter situations similar to those faced by the character Kabir Khan. They too are not trusted, and they had to confront the mistrust that underlines their interactions with the majority population stoically. The reference to “finger pointing” indicates that Rehman was consciousness of the lack of a level playing field for Muslims in the Indian society. But he was still hopeful about the future because his class advantages (which I recognized) had given him access to superior educational facilities. I could read in

his response an acute desire to participate in the Indian society as an equal. And he was ready to make the concessions demanded of him as a member of a minority community. He also recognized the need for Muslims to be vigilant and to carefully watch their step, because he understood that their rights as citizens were not absolutely secure.

The fact that I could talk with greater ease about reel life, for example the movie *Chak De India* and its characters, as compared to real events, such as the Glasgow bombings and the detention of a Muslim doctor in Australia, and that I addressed the issues circuitously and not directly does not diminish the import of my findings. Instead, it illuminates the power of media discourses and the reluctance of members of minority populations to challenge these discourses because they instill in the Muslim population an awareness of their marginal status, which is compounded by fear of persecution. The media text *Chak De India* had raised awareness about the injustices suffered by Muslims in a sympathetic manner and in a popular forum. The movie was a box office hit, which indicated that it had been well received among the majority Hindu population. Hence, the Muslim youth did not hesitate to discuss this film. However, they steered clear of commenting on media coverage and opinions that condemned them as guilty, not only because they were so overwhelming and pervasive, but because Muslim youth lacked confidence in their rights as Indian citizens. Their situation was particularly compromised by the unfortunate events of the summer of 2007, as the fear of state's intrusiveness in their lives had increased. The important lesson for the ethnographer was that the successful execution of the ethnographic research in the shadow of state persecution calls for greater sensitivity to silences and the ability to structure oblique dialogues that addressed the core problem without damaging the informant's safety.

Conclusion

My experiences in the course of this research have shown that the distinctions between insider and outsider ethnography are not absolute. Often during the course of a single encounter with my research subjects my position moved from the privileged perspective of an insider to that of an outsider and vice versa. The shifting of vantage points was dictated both by our internal differences of class and education, as well as by the inhospitable political climate where my research subjects and I feared the power of the state's vigilant forces. The external forces complicated my position within the community and the question of distinguishing whether I negotiated as an insider or outsider became too difficult to answer. This complication, however, did not diminish the ethnographic experience. In fact, my observations and reflections were enriched by the awareness of the points at which the ethnographer's and the research community's interests united or diverged and of the reasons that prompted the shifting of positions. I agree with

Narayan (1993) that as factors aligning or separating the anthropologist from their subjects are in a constant flux, negotiating as both an insider and an outsider would enrich an ethnographer's reflections. I also propose that to create more nuanced scholarship circumstances, for example the fear of profiling and state surveillance, which influence the ethnographer's position must also be taken into account.

The task of excavating the experiences and voices of a population whose apprehensions about its safety were multiplied many fold by the negative stereotypes that circulated about them can be seen as performance of anthropology as a form of cultural critic (Marcus & Fischer 1999). Marcus and Fischer propose that there is a need for more experimental literature especially if anthropology has to distinguish itself in the competing systems of representations and meet the challenges posed by mediated discourses. My experience in the field has shown that by adopting an eclectic approach and by focusing on the silences and gaps that are not accounted for in dominant media discourses, ethnographers can provide insight into the historical, social, economic and political contexts that lie buried under social injustices and prejudices. My struggles to establish my identity among the Muslim community have also exposed the need for constant innovation in methodological approaches if anthropology has to illuminate the dark spots on the other side of media glare and bring another truth into light.

Tabassum “Ruhi” Khan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside. Her research focuses on emergent identities of Indian Muslim youth at the intersections of discourses of globalization, liberalization of Indian economy and entrenched religious/cultural practices and beliefs. E-mail: ruhi.khan@ucr.edu.

Notes

- 1 According to the Sachar Committee Report commissioned by the Prime Minister of India in 2005, Muslims are poorly represented in the mainstream educational institutes on account of their various disadvantages (Sachar Committee 2006).

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