From the Selected Works of Chakraverti Mahajan

2011

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The recent demolition of the Noor Masjid in Jangpura by the Delhi Development Authority was actually an attempt by the local residents welfare association at sanitising the area by excluding the plebeians in general and the Muslim poor in particular. It is also an example of the new patterns of segregation of India’s urban population on class and ethno-religious lines albeit by using the politically correct language of landownership rights. The affected Muslims, while reacting with moral outrage, also used the language of rights, and of tenure as the main plank of their counteroffensive. This suggests that the sense of alienation of Indian Muslims is not yet complete.

It was still pitch dark on the morning of 12 January and the namazis (devotees) gathered at the Noor Masjid, in south Delhi’s Jangpura colony, had just completed the first rakat (a cycle of prayer) of the Fajr (dawn) prayer when the bulldozers of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) rolled in. As one of the caretakers of the mosque who was present on the scene recalls,

"Full-scale oppression was unleashed upon us and while beating our companions, they martyred the mosque (bara zuhm kara aur marte marte hamare sathion ko masjid shahid kari)."1

According to another caretaker of the mosque, this demolition was accompanied by a deliberate desecration of the Holy Quran and other religious books:

"They told us that the Muslim staff accompanying them would take care of the Quran-e-Sharif and other religious books, but this is not how it happened. We kept on screaming and lamenting. We did what we could to save the Quran-e-Sharif from being desecrated but they were not responsive and without showing any concern (bedardi se), they made fun of our religious sentiments (mashab ko masak uraaye)."2

These first-hand accounts of the events convey the sense of religious outrage of at least some sections of Delhi’s Muslim population over the DDA’s action, which grew and took a political turn after the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid, came to lead the following week’s Friday prayer among the rubble of the “martyred” mosque. However, the idiom of religious outrage and its afferent moral claims and calls for reparation (Blom and Jaoul 2008) was not the exclusive mode of enunciation of Muslim discontent regarding this demolition. The same outraged clerics also “talk dirty” (Rudd 2009) particularly about their adversaries in the local residents welfare association while using the language of rights, the principal terrain of their counter-attack.

The responses of lay Muslims to this affair also present significant variations, sometimes even within the same narrative. It is this plurality of discontents – or the “frame disputes” (Benford 1993) around the event – which constitutes the subject of our investigation here.

After contextualising this event by locating it in the current transformations of Delhi’s social geography, we examine a series of expressions of discontent, which we collected in the following weeks from among members of the managing committee of the Noor Masjid, among the few Muslim residents of Jangpura as well as among Muslim residents of other localities.

Is Delhi Becoming Bourgeois and Islamophobic?

The demolition of the Noor Masjid by the DDA, with the support of the Delhi police, cannot be reduced to a matter of public policy. The primary force behind this demolition was the Jangpura Residents Association (JRA) and its “beautification” drive. In 2006, the JRA filed a public interest litigation (PIL) before the Delhi High Court requesting the removal of all encroachments along the Barapullah nallah (broad storm water drains) and on adjacent public land, so that these could be transformed into a green area. The JRA filed a new application before the high court on 7 July 2008, asking for the demolition of all remaining structures, including the Noor Masjid. By then, the jhuggi-jhopdi (slums) cluster located along the nallah had been demolished by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) – one of Delhi’s many slums to have been removed in the preparation for the Commonwealth Games. This cluster mostly housed a population of Bengali/Bangladeshi Muslim migrants, to whose spiritual needs the Noor Masjid catered. The organic relationship between this Bangladeshi population and the demolished mosque has generally been missed in media accounts of the events. For residents of Jangpura’s B block, however, there is no doubt that “this was a Bangladeshi mosque” and that “it was a source of nuisance”, as one elderly Hindu woman resident told us.3 However, the same resident also resented

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the presence of the mosque in the colony as it attracted “all sorts of people” (tarah tarah ke log) from other localities. This xenophobia, nurtured by the sense and experience of living in a gated community, has not yet evolved into full-blown Islamophobia but rather focuses on the disturbing, polluting presence of the poor – the dirty, illiterate, immoral and generally uncivilised “chote gande log” (Froysstad 2005). This is what two male residents – an elderly Hindu, in his late eighties, and a middle-aged Sikh – suggest:

Look, there used to be 2,000 jhuggis. If we left anything outside – trunks, cardboards, anything, they would steal it... If we were out for two days, they would break in... Now, even if we let our clothes dry outside, nobody steals them... Earlier, they would even steal things in broad daylight (sab din dehur gayah ho janda si)... – There were some miscreants among them (iste ghalat admi bhi rande si), – All sorts of wrongful activities were going on in the jhuggis (ghalat kam bare hote the, jhuggion mein). They were smoking smack (heroin) and in the night they would commit robberies (rat nu chorian karde si, tale tod de si).4

This everyday xenophobia does not target Muslims as such, or not primarily, but the uncouth plebeians threatening “gracious urban living” (Baviskar 2002: 40). This is attested by the fact that in its 2006 PIL, the JRA asked for the removal of the mosque but also of the neighbouring Balmiki temple – which was finally spared by the DDA on the recommendation of the Lieutenant Governor’s (LG) “religious committee”, on the ground that it was a more ancient structure. This assessment came to validate the contested claim of the JRA, according to whose members the Noor Masjid was constructed in 2005 in place of a makeshift structure – against the claims of the managing committee of the mosque and the local (Congress) MLA, Tarvinder Singh Marwah, according to whom the mosque is in fact 30 years old.5

This attempt at sanitising Jangpura by excluding the plebes in general and the Muslim poor in particular, euphemised by the politically correct language of land ownership rights and “beautification”, is an invitation to complicate Partha Chatterjee’s interrogations on the embourgeoisement of Indian cities (Chatterjee 2004). Chatterjee’s argument, focused as it is on the strengthening of social and territorial boundaries between urban classes, misses a part of the picture: the new patterns of segregation of India’s urban population on class but also on ethno-religious lines, something attested by the proliferation of ethnic enclaves and religious ghettos in Indian cities (Gayer and Jaffrelot forthcoming). Ironically enough, the very resident welfare associations (RWAs) which play the role of “guardians of the bourgeois city” (Anjaria 2009) by reclaiming public land “illegally” occupied by the poor are increasingly violating the law by denying a right of residence to “outsiders” from a different caste, ethnicity or creed. These ethnic illegalisms, however, may soon become a thing of the past, as the commitment of the judiciary to promote pluralistic urban living has been receding in recent years, making way for a more accommodating position towards ethnically or religiously homogenous “colonies”, as suggested by the 2005 judgment of the Supreme Court in the case of the Zoroastrian Cooperative Housing Society Ltd vs District Registrar of Cooperative Societies and others.6

It is at this stage that the State should be brought back in: in its supportive role to initiatives of social cleansing emanating from political society and aiming at “the production of a clean space” through the pushing back of “the physical, mental and political pollutions which compromise it” (Certeau 1990: 143). In the case considered here, this contribution has been ambivalent. Far from speaking in a single voice, the local state was multivocal, which added to the confusion. The impulse for the demolition of the Noor Masjid came from the LG of Delhi, who ordered the DDA to proceed after consulting a shadowy “religious committee”, whose members’ identities were not revealed despite repeated pleas from the Zakat Foundation of India, a Jamia Nagar-based NGO headed by civil servant and educationist Syed Zafar Mahmood. The high court, however, seems to have differed with the LG and the DDA on the matter. In response to the 7 July 2008 petition of the JRA and on the basis of photographs provided by the association, the court concluded that most illegal structures had been removed according to its directives and that, as far as the mosque was concerned, the construction of a boundary wall was a guarantee against further encroachment. In view of these developments, the court no longer considered it necessary “to continue to monitor the progress of the implementation of its directions” in this matter. The DDA’s claim that the high court “ordered” the demolition is therefore dubious (Mahmood 2011) and the local Urdu press accused the DDA of “hypocrisy” (munafiqat) (Rizvi 2011: 1). Nonetheless, the ball is currently in the court’s camp and 21 March has been fixed for further hearing.

A Demolition and Its Discontents

Muslim opponents of the demolition drive were no more univocal than the State they confronted. As already suggested, their discontent first took the form of moral outrage, which found public expression in clashes with the police around the site of the Noor Masjid and in the neighbouring locality of Nizamuddin on 12 and 13 January. This rhetoric of moral outrage centring on the “martyred mosque” (shahid masjid) and the “injustice” (na insaf) to Muslims was endorsed by public figures such as Syed Ahmad Bukhari and relayed by the Urdu press (e.g, Rizvi and Atif 2011). Among some of our respondents, it even took the shape of a language of self-sacrifice, the gravity of the outrage requiring selfless commitment to obtain reparation. This is what a “Bengali” resident – possibly a Bangladeshi evicted from the slum cluster – suggested to us, while referring to the post-demolition court judgment limiting to 10 the number of

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Muslims allowed to perform namaz simultaneously on the site:

Nobody can stop people from performing namaz or puja. You can stop them by beating them and breaking their legs, but you cannot stop their hearts and souls, because whatever community you belong to, when you have to pray, you have to (hath per marke torke rok sakte ho, lekin uske dil ki atma ko nahin rok sakte, kyunki unhone ne puja karna hai to karna hai, chahe voh kisi bhi qaum se ho).7

However, the same outraged Muslims are prompt to temper their emotions and shift to distinct modes of enunciation of their discontent. Another possible way to express this discontent is to “talk dirty” about local politics, by questioning the probity of the managing team of the JRA or that of Muslim politicians whose vested interests would prevent them from antagonising the DDA. Thus, a caretaker of the Noor Masjid accused one of the influential members of the JRA of being a “420” (crook, a reference to the section of the Indian Penal Code dealing with frauds):

This man is a “420”. He takes money from builders. (...) This guy is involved in all kinds of dodgy activities, the truth is that he is a total goon (Yeh karna voh karna, matlab badnash kism ka admi hai voh, 420 hai ek number ka).8

A resident of Jamia Nagar who was monitoring developments on the site of the demolished mosque with his video camera, accused a prominent Muslim MLA of avoiding any confrontation with the DDA out of fear that the latter would question his own violations of building regulations:

(This) MLA used to ride a scooter. Now he has all kinds of cars – Honda, Skoda... He himself has encroached on DDA’s land and has extended his house into a farm house. Now he has two horses, ten ducks, four turkeys, and even some pheasants... These people make deals with the DDA. They say “You can take all other lands in every nook and corner of the city but do not touch us”. Since they do not get many votes in these localities, why should they worry?9

If these attacks on Muslim politicians tend to suggest some disillusionment with the democratic set-up of modern India, it is tempered by the persistent attachment of all our respondents to the rule of law. The language of rights, and more specifically of tenure, is the meeting ground of Muslims of all persuasion, and the principal terrain of their counteroffensive. Rather than in the streets, the Delhi Waqf Board and the managing committee of the Noor Masjid – registered as the “Noor Masjid Charitable Society” – decided to confront the JRA and the DDA in the courts, by arguing that Khasra no 633, the plot where the Noor Masjid stood, was notified in the Delhi Gazette of 1975 as a Muslim graveyard and in fact the property of the Delhi Waqf Board. This legal counter-attack through the claim of property rights suggests that the sense of alienation of Indian Muslims is not yet complete and that even “outraged” Muslims retain confidence in the judiciary as the ultimate arbiter of social conflicts. This attachment to the rule of law is exemplified by one of the caretakers of the mosque:

We will keep on fighting this case and we don’t want to go against the law. Whatever we will do and say will be in accordance with the law (Aur iske liye case chal raha hai aur iske liye ham kisi bhi tara se qaman ke kholaf nahin jana chahte. Qaman ke dayare mein hi rahe sara kam karenge, sari bat karenge). It should be emphasised here that the vocabulary of rights of our Muslim respondents is not one of exceptionalism, claiming some kind of special treatment or the creation of new rights for Muslims – “We are not asking (this land) for free” (free mein nahin mang rahe), claimed the aforementioned Bengali/Bangladeshi resident. More conventionally, the legal claims of Muslim defenders of the mosque focus on the implementation of existing laws – no more, but certainly not less.

From the point of view of our Muslim respondents, if the high court has erred on the issue it is not so much due to its anti-Muslim bias as because it was misled by other organs of the State with a more dubious record. Thus, according to the Bengali/Bangladeshi migrant worker mentioned above,

Whether it is the DDA or the police department, or administrators of MCD, all of them mislead the Court. When they go to Court, they tell all sorts of things and claim that everything is encroached upon. The Court has told them that whoever is in possession of the original papers, the property belongs to them. But they told the Court that the mosque was encroaching.10

Before closing this section on the pervasiveness of the language of rights among our Muslim respondents, let us emphasise that this invocation of the law is not limited to the secular legal corpus. Thus, one of our respondents, a Muslim electrician residing in the neighbouring locality of Sarai Kale Khan, invoked the sharia to chastise the initiatives of the clerics and politicians arguing that the mosque should be rebuilt:

According to the sharia, this (constructing a mosque on contested land) is wrong, and if somebody is a party to it, that makes him a sinner (gunahgar). (...) If I have an empty plot and quite a lot of money, and gift it to build a mosque, nobody should be bothered about it. But if I am using your land to build a mosque, that is wrong (Yeh rule nahin hai). (...) But those (religious leaders) involved in politics have to align themselves with politicians, isn’t it? (jo isme mila hua hai, siyasat mein hai, voh toh milke chaalna hai, na?).11

Conclusions

The case of the Noor Masjid demolition first points at the actual influence of at least some rwas in the shaping of India’s urban policies.12 This is particularly true when the claims of these “essentially undemocratic institutions” (Tawa Lama-Rewal 2007: 54) happen to converge with the institutional interests of public actors. Policies of social cleansing targeting undesirable populations are one of the possible sites of this elite-oriented State-citizens partnership in the field of urban governance, which “endorses and creates realms of illegality and exclusions” while redefining citizenship as a contractual relationship between the “caring State” and “the occupants of legally defined neighbourhoods” (Srividost 2009: 345). Here, the continuum between the demolition of Jangpura’s slum cluster before the cwg and that of the Noor Masjid should be emphasised, as well as its triple stigmatisation

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by Jangpura’s residents as a place of worship catering to the needs of poor, foreign Muslims.

This overlapping of class contempt, nationalism and religious xenophobia complicates Partha Chatterjee’s argument on the embourgeoisement of Indian cities, by suggesting that the new gated communities of urban India are not merely built on class boundaries but, increasingly, on ethno-religious ones as well. In these privatised public spaces, endowed with the reassuring but precarious familiarity of the household, the visibility of places of worship – and particularly that of “others” – becomes a bone of contention. It actualises the “insider/outsider division of identity” characteristic of mohalla formation (Chakrabarty 2006: 70), which takes a particularly acute form in today’s gated communities. As the case of the Noor Masjid mosque suggests, this inside/outside divide is fluctuant. Until the demolition of the slum cluster located along the Barapullah nullah, the plot where the mosque was located remained a liminal space, a border area between the spotless and the slum cluster located along the Bara Jid mosque suggests, this inside/outside divide is fluctuant. Until the demolition of the slum cluster located along the Barapullah nullah, the plot where the mosque was located remained a liminal space, a border area between the spotless and the dangerous, filthy world of the poor. However, once the land occupied by the jhuggi-wallahs was reclaimed from them, the mosque was brought “inside” the mohalla and its presence suddenly became incongruous. Some residents even suggested to us that the mosque should follow the evicted jhuggi-wallahs to their resettlement colony, as exemplified by this extract of a conversation we had with an elderly Hindu family of his Sikh neighbour hailed from Sialkot.

The reactions of Nizamuddin’s Muslim legal activism may not be new for Delhi Muslims – the “repeated citation of legal land rights” was already pointed out in the reactions of Nizamuddin’s Muslim population to the “riot” of 17 March 1990 (Datta et al 1990: 2489) – but it seems to be reinvigorated by a growing sense of being discriminated against in all spheres of life.

**NOTES**

1. Interview, Noor Masjid, Delhi, 23 January 2011. This first visit to the site took place on a Sunday afternoon. A group of namazis was sitting among the rubble of the mosque on plastic mats just before the Asar prayer. Once they started praying in groups of ten, a policeman started video-taping the scene. The presence of the police was overwhelming, although less impressive than on Fridays, when the locality is literally under siege, with hundreds of policemen (including heavily armed riot police) blocking every entry point to the neighbourhood. Both the police and local Muslims were suspicious with our presence. The former repeatedly asked us not to take any photographs, whereas some Muslims present on the site of the demolished mosque asked for our identity cards.

2. Interview, Noor Masjid, Delhi, 23 January 2011.

3. Interview, Jangpura, Delhi, 28 January 2011.

4. Interview, Jangpura, Delhi, 2 February 2011. This Hindu resident was born in Lahore, whereas the family of his Sikh neighbour hailed from Sialkot. Their families were allotted flats in Jangpura in the early 1950s. They spoke to us in a mixture of Hindi and Punjabi.

5. “DDA Blamed for Turning a Blind Eye to Encroachment”, The Hindu, 14 January 2011. This judgment concerned a Parsi Housing Society in Modern India (Delhi: Oxford University Press).


8. Rivzi, Munzzam Alam and Mohammad Atif (2011): “Sarkar Dekhti Rahi Aur Masjid Shahid Kar Di Gai” (Urdu) (While the government watched, the mosque was martyred), Sahafat, 13 January: 1.


