Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research
Vol. 7, No. 1 (Summer 2021)

Journeys between *khauf* and *khairiyat*: Thinking through friendship in the "field"

Madhulika Sonkar and Benazir Ruqayya

Abstract:

This essay brings together an anthropologist and an interlocutor as friends who write about building solidarities in the field. We look back at the events preceding the landmark protests by Muslim women against the citizenship laws in India by tracing the roots of a friendship fraught with tensions and ethical dilemmas. In this essay, we pull out the personal and biographical moments that often remain enmeshed within the emergent and political. Our attempts to document, archive, restore, and narrate experiences of a year synonymous with crisis become intertwined with mapping the contours and fabric of our friendship. Drawing upon the attempts made towards reclaiming egalitarian and accountable practices of building knowledge through feminist coalitions in the Global South (Basarudin and Bhattacharya 2016; Nagar and Geiger 2007, Minai and Shroff 2019), this essay is informed by the need to produce counter-methodologies through practices of solidarity, co-writing, and reciprocal engagement. We attempt to destabilize the classic trope of observer-observed as we co-write about experiences that brought us together. In critically engaging with our struggles with feminist praxis, we build on experiences ridden with risk, vulnerability, and emotions in anthropological method and everyday relations. While writing about the crises and its undercurrents as friends and co-authors, we grapple with questions of citizenship, identity, being, becoming, belonging, assertion, suffering, and invisibilisation of Muslims in India.

Introduction

During the numerous conversations we had while planning this essay, we were baffled and amused at the frequent appearance of two words in the electronic messages exchanged between us in the year 2020: *Sab khairiyat*?[1] These two words had become metaphors of survival for us. We were both curious as to who started it first, something easy to trace when digital footprints and screenshots become an archival trap of their own. Benazir recalls using it the first time when inquiring about the well-being of her cousin's sister who had joined the sit-in protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) led by Muslim women at ShaheenBagh, Delhi.[2] *Sab Khairiyat* became shorthand for how we would check on each other. We sifted through old notes and incomplete conversations between us that created possibilities of a different kind of memory work. In the process, we also pieced together fragments of the mundane, disorder, and uncertainty that chased us. However, the exercise of "looking back" soon became an initiation into opening doors for some uncomfortable questions related to our identity. These questions were enmeshed in our personal worlds and political locations – and the search for answers required us to untangle the many threads that led to our friendship. It seemed what we experienced in 2020 was part of an ongoing crisis – one that traced continuities with the global pandemic, but had been spiraling over the last few years in India. Our friendship, though seemingly steeped in the category of "womanhood," had grown in years that were marked by silencing, state oppression, violence, vulnerabilities, political exclusion, everyday forms of marginalization, and a deepening fear of living as a Muslim in a Hindu majoritarian state.

We looked back at the shadows of 2020; the project of documenting, archiving, restoring, and telling experiences of a year synonymous with crisis became intertwined with mapping the contours and fabric of a friendship fraught with tensions. It inevitably required us to locate the making of a friendship between two women who were set worlds apart even as solidarities made their way through what looked like impenetrable boundaries.

In our search for no absolute answers, we both decided to undertake the troubled task of situating our friendship within the realm of anthropological inquiry. We decided to return to where it all began in the year 2016: Madhulika, as a non-Muslim ethnographer, and Benazir, as the interlocutor in the urban neighborhood of Old Delhi. In these five years, our friendship has transpired through a series of emergent encounters with the political and patriarchal structures that our personal worlds were entrenched in. We write about our friendship in these messier worlds.

The diagnoses of a friendship that finds its ground in ethnographic research will also allow us to take on the critical questions of power imbalances, epistemological dilemmas, methodological aspects, and the possibilities of opening our everyday experiences to a reflexive feminist gaze. In making sense of the

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[1] *Sab Khairiyat* (All Okay): *Khairiyat* (خیریت) is an Urdu word denoting well-being, care and safety. *Khauf* (خوف), as used in the title of this essay, denotes fear, panic, and anxiety.

[2] The sit-in protest site was cleared off in March 2020. However, rumors related to the police crackdown at the protestors were frequently circulated through social media. https://thewire.in/rights/shaheen-bagh-cleared-coronavirus-lockdown

events that generated the political context of 2020 here in India, we do not intend to slip away with the invocation of a sisterly identification resting on an essentialist understanding of womanhood. Rather, we hope to lay bare the anecdotal, intimate, and biographical reflections that emerge through the ruptures and continuities of our positions. In this essay, we explore the possibilities of engaging with relational, collective, collaborative, and compassionate modes of knowledge production (Minai and Shroff 2019). It is in these delineated intersectional, decolonized feminist ethics of care and compassion that we find the way to engage with the praxis of meaning-making, documenting, and circulating knowledge together.

While we come together as friends to write this piece, we situate ourselves in distinct positions to address reciprocity and relation in de-centered ethnographic knowledge. In the process, we engage with the feminist debates on fieldwork, friendships, and politics of identity. In departing backwards from a year characterized by crisis, resistance, revolution, dissent, we seek no definite arrivals. What we hope to do is ask a basic question: Can friendship become the ground for crafting an ethnography of solidarity?

Each of this essay's three main parts are situated as layers of experiences and multivocal accounts aimed at producing a patchwork of affective journeys. Across the three sections, we trace formations, challenges and conflicts, and exercises of solidarity-building through personal and collective experiences. While we realize the centrality of temporality in any exploration of archival moments, we intend to destabilize the definitive capacity of "chronology." With the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, and the National Register of Citizens, the word "chronology" came to signify fear and systematic exclusion in India's political landscape.[3] An underwritten aim of this essay is to subvert and contest chronology by creating a tapestry of voices and experiences not woven through an orderly timeline.

Different voices, writing together

The representation of the anthropologist as a "stranger" who participates in "native" life while maintaining objectivity and distance in ethnographic ties has been focus of the feminist and postmodern critique in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Ahmed 2000, Smith 2012). While discussions on reflexivity called for encountering tensions of positionality in anthropology, the degree of proximity engendered in ethnographic relations was largely informed by the categories of participant-observer. These modes of representation, where the ethnographer was always believed to have the authorial authority, have resulted in a hierarchical model of knowledge production rooted in colonial perspectives.

Drawing upon the attempts made towards reclaiming egalitarian and accountable practices of building knowledge through feminist coalitions (Smith 2012, Basarudin and Bhattacharya 2016; Minai and Shroff 2019; Blasco and Hernández 2020), we are driven by the need to produce counter-methodologies through

[3] The word chronology acquired a public and political popularity after the Home Minister used it in one of his speeches in the Indian Parliament to explain the process of implementation of the NRC-CAA. https://theprint.in/politics/mitron-aap-chronology-samajhiye-this-is-how-amit-shahs-line-has-gone-viral/379823/

practices of solidarity, co-writing, and reciprocal engagement. While foregrounding friendship, we attempt to destabilize the classic trope of observer-observed as we co-write about experiences that brought us together.

To curate a methodology for writing, we started with an initial round of conversations across two different tangents: (a) our respective disciplinary vantage points, (b) our perspectives on the positioning of voice.[4] A key challenge for us in the process has been maintaining distinctions of our individual voice while also creating space for a collective "our/us/we." Maintaining distinctions of voice and narrative through the creation of collective here is not simply redemption from the "speaking on behalf of each other" or "us versus them" tactics. Instead, it is an attempt to create a common ground where we engage with each other's experiences while acknowledging differences. We write differently – as Benazir (**B**) and Madhulika (**M**) – and let the collective, co-authorial voice be generated through dialogue. This allows us to investigate the political implications of what Sara Ahmed (2000) calls "strangerness and friendship" in ethnographic relationships.

While we build on critical moments that were significant in our journey from strangers to friends amidst a changing political landscape, Benazir responds to some of the ethnographic material collected during Madhulika's fieldwork. In the course of our discussions on the essay, we explored the possibilities of acknowledging our motivations behind a collective writing exercise. As the year 2019-2020 represented a radically different representation of Muslim women as fierce, contrary to the polar opposite prejudice against them as burdened under Islam, Benazir considers the task of finding and claiming voice as central to her writing process. For Madhulika, anthropological tensions that came with laying bare vulnerabilities and differences of positionality became entwined with the feminist praxis of knowledge building. With these ideations, we co-write in the midst of crises. The collective motivations also stem from the need to shift from transactional to relational methodologies – a change instrumental to construction of responsible knowledge (Minai and Shroff 2019).

With distinct disciplinary vantage points, we opt for a politicized approach to address and critically engage with wider debates on feminist practice and friendships in the field. Our aim is to let the process of co-authoring or co-building enter into a dialogue with politics of solidarity. As Parvez (2018) rightly captures the tensions of emotions that engulf the ethnographer as well as informants, we build on the need to locate knowledge-construction at the interstices of emotions, events, experiences, and the emergent in decolonial, feminist praxis.

Roots

[4] These conversations took place over phone and video calls during lockdown in Delhi in May-June 2021. Parts of the essay are a result of transcripts generated through phone conversations, review comments, and notes exchanged between authors.

Claiming friendships and alliances in ethnographic journeys is a process marked by friction. While the scrutiny and scholarly gaze that friendships and alliances receive in spaces such as ethnographic fields may not be the same as friendships in ordinary, everyday life, the question of what constitutes, cultivates, and nurtures friendship always remains at the centre. Even as friendships can never be situated as abrupt, isolated events, they come with limitless possibilities of transcending the messy and ambiguous caveats of research positions. Friendships are, therefore, also situated as political acts (Basarudin and Bhattacharya 2016). In this part of the essay, we hope to trace the roots to experiences, conditions, and beliefs that brought us together. We seek to untangle the processes shaped through affect, vulnerability, and reclamation of solidarity politics that did not emerge from categories such as "objectivity," "insider-outsider," "native and other."

M: As a non-Muslim anthropologist, I met Benazir at the school where I was conducting ethnography. While I was a few months into my doctoral fieldwork at the Muslim girls' school in Old Delhi, Benazir was all set to complete her schooling. I knew of her as the "school topper" who was often spotted in the corridors discussing academic work with her peers. While this was one of the earliest impressions I had of her, my first introduction with Benazir was soon after she had delivered a powerful speech at the school graduation ceremony in late January 2017. Benazir spoke about being the first woman from her family who had completed schooling. She spoke about her dreams, vision, aspirations, and what being educated meant to her as a young woman in Old Delhi. I was sitting among two-hundred odd people in the audience, including her teachers, peers, and other staff members, that afternoon. The first response to Benazir's speech was a deafening silence, broken by unanimous applause. With my notebook in one hand, I rushed to congratulate her. As Benazir was ready to leave for home, we hurriedly exchanged greetings. Realizing the pace of the moment, I scribbled my phone number on a piece of paper and handed it over to Benazir. She wrote her phone number on the last page of my notebook.

B: I had heard about Madhulika *aapi* from my younger cousin Sadia in class 11. Sadia had told me *aapi* was attending classes with them every day to learn more about Muslim girls' education. As a class 12 student, I hardly got the time to step out of the library. It was in February 2017 that we met and spoke for the first time during a discussion session *aapi* was having with class 11 girls. I had taken a short break from a study session and decided to walk through the corridor outside the principal's office. I saw a group of girls sitting with her in an empty classroom next to the corridor. I decided to join them too. The discussion was on "marriage and education for girls in old Delhi." I sat on the last bench and just listened to the conversation unfold. I am from the Punjabi Muslim community,[5] and we were known for marrying off the girls early, usually soon after school. Suddenly, in the middle of the conversation, one of the girls from the group turned towards me and said: "*Aap bhi kuch boliye na. Aap to topper hain, padhengi hi aage*" (You too say something

[5] Punjabi Muslim is a *beraderi* (kin group) among Muslims in Old Delhi. They are also known as *Qaum-e-Punjabian* (Community of Punjabis), invested in business and trading as an endogamous group.

please. You are a topper; would definitely study further). I felt nervous and just said: *Inshallah*. After the discussion was over, we walked to the school gate. Our conversation that day was brief but very comforting. *Aapi* and I left together with the promise to meet again after my final exams.

In April 2017, soon after my exams, I met *aapi* again. We met for lunch at my place and spoke at length about my higher education plans. She suggested the names of some colleges to my mother as they would be close to my home. She knew my parents were apprehensive about my further studies. And the reasons were all tied to my marriage. To put it in other words, my father did not want to go through the struggle of having a daughter more educated than her prospective partner. Men in our community are more likely to drop out of school to join family business or work. As the eldest sister to four brothers, my marriage was like *fait accompli,* and expressing any hope to study further was unwelcomed. Amidst all this, Madhulika *aapi*'s support for my higher education came like a hopeful twist in the future I was expected to embrace. For both of us, education emerged as a significant dimension to who we were. I was closely witnessing *aapi* move through her PhD journey, and recognize the change that "being educated" could bring to a woman's life. I got to know she was also the first woman in her family to be pursuing a PhD degree. Our lives were degrees apart, and looking at her, it never felt unreal to hope and aspire for a simple thing: to study and learn more. We bonded over conversations on being a daughter, gender, my life as a woman in Old Delhi, and education as a dream, among many other issues.

At the intersection of our distant realities, we found refuge from the worlds we were chasing as young women. Our lives were marked by common settings of patriarchal institutions – where one had managed to gain a sense of volition and agential space through education, and the other aspired for it. What also felt common to the ordinariness of our existence was the expectation to become a "good daughter." This meant enduring vulnerabilities that came with daughterhood. Forging this friendship, thus, became a way to encounter dilemmas emerging from what we faced within the private and public. Our friendship was messy – layered between the multiple registers of pleasure, support, care, solidarity, and vulnerability. It offered to us creative possibilities of building a "sound, morally and politically informed alliance" (Code 1991).

M: While we paved our way through a collective politics that found hope in knowing the struggles and negotiations with our aspirations, the world around us was clearly shot through with differences. As a non-Muslim, oppressed-caste woman, known as a "Hindu researcher" in the field, it would be erroneous to locate my friendship with Benazir as a "sanitized relationship" untouched by the politics of identity.[6] In the days we had met, violence and atrocities against Muslims and

[6] In using the term "oppressed-caste," I am aware and cautious of the ways in which it might depoliticise my caste identity as a researcher. However, this stance is motivated by the need to keep intact the constantly shifting and incoherent play of caste in my friendship with Benazir. I do not situate caste positionality as an obvious, unhindered step to solidarity, as discussions on caste continue to unfold and seep into a friendship that is an ongoing relationship. Further, in the context of the focus and scope of this piece, I do not intend to use "Dalit," "oppressed-caste," and "lower caste" interchangeably for concerns best explained by Bargi (2014) on identificatory processes and claim-making as a Dalit woman.

marginalized caste groups in India were rising with each passing day.[7] Our identity differences were paralleled by the shared experiences of constantly situating the self at the periphery. To say that I could comfortably position myself as an "educated," "outsider," non-Muslim woman set to research about Muslim women's educational aspirations would have meant erasure of this very politics of shared, yet different marginality. Our understanding towards building solidarity through friendship possibly emerged from the need to claim a political alliance rooted in the everyday. Our encounters with the mundane events of life did allow us to bristle with differences of caste, class, educational mobility, and religion in our respective positions.

Even as Visweswaran (1997) underlines the need for "strategies of disidentification" instead of gender essentialism in feminist ethnographies, fostering friendships is critical to the making of empathetic, socially grounded and collaborative methods of knowledge production. In the midst of accompanying each other to colleges, interviews, and vocational training centres in the city, our friendship opened doors to a process of community attachment. It was stitched through everyday processes of running errands together in the evening, filling up entrance exam forms, and through the acts of reading field notes together. It steered the ways through which I understood the complex realities of Muslim neighborhoods in Old Delhi. It also meant that meaningful interventions of rapport building and relational research ethos are based in multivocal and intersubjective ethnographic relationship.

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May 2017: Notes from women's majlis at Rainbow Play School, Fayazganj, Old Delhi

B: I often wondered what made Madhulika *aapi* choose the topic of Muslim women's education. I thought of it as an obvious choice considering that Muslim women in India were pictured as voiceless, *bechari* (pitiful) women, and their educational aspirations were believed to be largely controlled by men. This image is bolstered by the fact that we have been reduced to monolithic icons as *burqa*-clad, oppressed, minority women with "too many children" who need to be rescued and emancipated from religious oppression. Just as I was caught between the tensions of being a Muslim woman in India, I shared with *aapi* my discomfort with how Muslim women were situated in the popular imaginary. There were days when I wondered how *I* or my friends would be *written about.*

In May 2017, my cousin's sister Ilma organised an education counseling meet at the playschool run by her family. Ilma and I had planned it together, and Madhulika *aapi* helped us mobilise through posters and messages. There were about 50 women from different neighborhoods of Old Delhi who had come to seek help regarding their children's education. To me, it was also an intriguing moment as these were women who were school drop-outs, homemakers, single parents. More

[7] https://scroll.in/article/924841/dalits-adivasis-muslims-targeted-in-at-least-five-incidents-since-bjp-won-the-election

importantly, these were Muslim women who the state believed were burdened with *Triple Talaq.* Aspirations for education became a meeting point for diverse classes, and castes of Muslim women, an inlet to break the myth of a common "community."[8] We had gathered to advocate for quality education at schools run by minority organisations. It was not surprising to hear from mothers speaking about how their children were bullied and teased about "eating beef" at mixed setting schools. We knew why there was a strong inclination towards schools run by Muslim organisations. Some of the women were sending their children to government schools, while many had access to private English-medium schools. This was also attributed to the mixed class and caste structure among the Muslim community of Old Delhi. However, to the ordinary outsider, we were part of a chaotic and cramped "Muslim *mohalla*." To be able to make sense of these differences was then part of deconstructing the "self as a subject" waiting to be rescued since the colonial period. The afternoon at Rainbow Play School was one of the busiest and most recuperative times I had experienced after completing school. While I struggled to find a direction for my personal educational pursuits, to see and hear from other women about what constrained them, strengthened my resolve to use mobilisation and advocacy in the community for generating awareness towards education. It was not a grand revolution we had aimed for by coming together, but a reclamation of sorts, seized from the everyday processes. Later that evening, Madhulika *aapi* shared her extensive notes from the meeting and we prepared the plan for the next *majlis*.

Our experiences with the process of locating, cultivating and building networks among women helped us navigate through the hierarchies regulating us. In Madhulika's engagement with ethnographic practice, and in Benazir's initiatives with community awareness, the struggle with questions of difference, privilege, and power shaped productive conversations on feminist praxis. Friendship, as an analytic to politics, became intertwined with conceptual, ethical, and political dilemmas that we faced in everyday life. The more we encountered these dilemmas, the greater became the urge to articulate identity in relation to shifting politics. The constant need to fight for solidarity, and not assume it on the basis of sheer differences between us, became pivotal to our feminist engagement. Our individual, but connected journeys, intersected with pathways of several other women in Old Delhi. Meeting Muslim women and understanding their "self-definitions" became the counter-reading to the hegemonic imaginary of them as docile and voiceless (Collins 2000). Conversing, sharing experiences and narratives, dwelling over silences, and building appreciation towards the women we got to know through each other, with each other, also emerged as an exercise in trust building.

Ruptures and Recoveries

[8] The myth of a common community comes at the risk of ignoring the existence of caste among Muslims. As much as my own understanding of caste was defined by the assertive significance of *ummah* (collective Muslim community), its realities came closer to me through restrictions on women marrying in a low-ranking *beraderi* or in the derogatory labels that came with certain occupations.

The experience of being attuned and responsive to each other's lives, and growing from strangers to friends, was an important affective dimension to the practical modes of solidarity we aimed to practice. However, mutuality does not necessarily unfold as a goal-oriented and strategic partnership. Its organic and processual character rests within the emotive and vulnerable junctures individuals encounter together. While we do not intend to overplay the emotional bond that developed, relationships in the field are fraught with ambivalence and ambiguities emerging from conflicting moments and ruptures. As much as we received a sense of direction from our camaraderie, dilemmas of tensions and failure against the backdrop of crumbling democratic structures became difficult to deal with. These ruptures seemed to us like what Parvez (2018) calls "revelatory moments" in ethnographic journeys. To be constantly at loggerheads with feelings of *khauf* (fear) and to gather courage to care for *khairiyat* (well-being) called for persistent efforts and commitment as friends. We situate moments of personal ruptures and recoveries in a dialogue with the shifting imaginaries of nationhood and identity in India. We could not resort to Foucauldian or Marxist theories to comprehend the granularities of oppression. Instead, what we needed were empathetic acts of listening, respect, networks of care, and recognition of experiences.

> ***Madhulika's Field Notes, June 2017*:** With barely a few days left for Eid, an eerie silence and gloom had enveloped Old Delhi bylanes. The markets swelled up with crowds towards evening as people gathered for last minute shopping, yet the unease of hushed voices felt palpable in the final days of Ramzan. "*Badi berehmi aur na-insaafi hui hai*" (There has been immense brutality and injustice)*,* a woman said to the shopkeeper at the famous *Chitli Qabar Bazaar* near *Jama Masjid*. Every conversation, every silence emerged tied to Junaid, a 15-year old boy who was mobbed and killed on a train journey to his home town in Uttar Pradesh in North India. Junaid was returning home with his brothers after Eid shopping when a group of men stabbed him while arguing over a seat in the suburban train he boarded from Delhi. Junaid and his brothers were jeered at for being Muslim and beef eaters. As Muslim men gathered at condolence prayer meetings, tea stalls, and shops, details from a mobile phone video that had captured Junaid's killing ended up drawing deafening silence. The video had gone "viral" over the last few days. Eid 2017 was not the same anymore as men wore black bands during *namaz* prayer at the *Jama Masjid*. There was a collective rage brewing beneath the silence.
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> **B**: If one is to trace the ebb and flow of the crisis that had bound Muslims in India through critical events, Junaid's killing is definitely the tipping point. An ordinary young Muslim boy heading back home to celebrate Eid with his family is killed in a way that became signature of brutality against Muslims. Similar to Junaid's killing, 55-year old Pehlu Khan, a dairy farmer from Rajasthan was lynched by a group of young men claiming to be cow vigilantes in April 2017. Week after week there would be an unexplainable fear chasing the ordinary, working class Muslims who were on their way to work while the rest of upper caste Hindu, middle-class India continued to bask in the glory of the growth story. Between April and June 2017 alone, there were 24 cases of hate crimes against Muslims. The pattern was clear and common: a Muslim body, cow vigilantism, and a faceless mob. Projected spontaneity of these lynchings was a smokescreen potent enough to cover the strategic maneuvering of hate speeches. Yet, when the news of Junaid's death broke,

the apparent silence that Muslims in India were assumed to be living with was broken. Eid 2017 was soaked in silent protests across different parts of the country. On community WhatsApp groups and social media, the outrage built up. Under the title "not in my name," we witnessed protests by citizens from all walks of life in almost sixteen different cities of India in July 2017. One may think that the call to protest against lynchings and hate crimes was spontaneous; however, one must not mistake the outrage and articulations by Muslims as an abrupt or random response to any one particular event. Years and years of communal polarisation and violence had spiraled into angst, oblivious to the rest of India. The outpouring of solidarity was a much needed exercise; however, the ordinary Muslim household that did not have the wherewithal to deal with this crisis was reeling with fear and tensions. My father, who was the one holding decision-making capacity in our family, went ahead to get my younger brother Sajjad enrolled in the neighborhood *madrasa.* Even with options to get admission to pursue much better courses at a vocational training school in the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh, it was decided that it was "safer" for Sajjad to be in Delhi and complete his education. "Remember, the poor Muslims have no doors to knock in this country," my father would often tell us in response to any enthusiasm to move away from home for study and work. In the chaos that ensued the difficult summer of 2017, I wondered about the absurdity of life amidst lynchings. There would be days when seeing support and solidarities felt affirming, but recoveries felt far and vague at times. Pinning my hopes on education did not help either as our life-choices were becoming restrained by notions of fear, safety, and *halaat* (circumstances). It was becoming clear that my family did not expect me to be adamant about higher education plans. While many of my classmates from school were finding different directions to continue education after school, I was trying to forge an arrangement to not let it get abandoned. To my family, my seriousness as a woman about education was considered to be "foolhardy" given how Sajjad had to alter his plans as a man. Looking at the grim possibilities of my higher education, Madhulika *aapi* had suggested some distance education programmes. Her suggestions felt like our last-minute desperate attempts especially when hopes were gradually fading. I would be angry and frustrated at how the politics of identity and violence had affected individual lives in brutal ways. My *tahaffuz* (safety/security) was treated as the responsibility of my father, and any grand plans to pursue educational goals were cited as a threat to this very parental responsibility. My mother, who got married when she was in class 9, knew what education meant to me, but there was little she could do given the *halaat* of a patriarchal family and a nation in distress. On days when anxiety heightened, I would talk for hours with *aapi* to seek recoveries from the rage of conformity.

The messiness and definitional ambiguity of emotions in our lives carried cultural and biographical specificity (Parvez 2018); however, the vulnerability and affective dimensions of our experiences also reinforced intimacy. This opened doors to recognising and developing a deeper understanding of processes of solidarity at a time when the socio-political context of our existence remained fractured. The spate of lynchings and beatings continued in the months to come. Exactly a year after Junaid's killing, in the span of a week, four Muslim men were killed over rumors of cow trading. Qasim Qureshi in Uttar Pradesh's Hapur town, Sirabuddin Ansari, Murtaza Ansari, and Tauhid Ansari in Jharkhand were all killed by cow vigilante groups, "enraged" over cattle theft. The enormous cruelty of lynchings was not new to the

Indian subcontinent. Women labelled as witches; Dalits for cattle skinning, for growing moustache, for riding a horse to their wedding, or for "daring" to drink water from an "upper caste well;" lynching has always targeted the weakest colonial subjects. It was this ghastly brutality, combined with an absolute absence of conscience and justice that brought us back to the role and impact of solidarity, political alliances, and resistance. As much as the personal felt restrained by what went on in the political, we reflected on the faltering and failures within our feminist praxis.

M: The path to feminist fieldwork and ethnography is ridden with dilemmas particularly emerging from temporal and emotional dynamics between the ethnographer and participants. These dilemmas become more layered when the ethnographer attempts to transcend the conventional boundaries of positions and identities. Reflexive turn in anthropology had long pointed out the inability of insider-outsider categories in understanding nuanced lived realities of communities (Behar 1993). Stacey (1991) underlines the risks and dangers of exploitation that come with feminist ethnographies conducted on the grounds of "mutual respect and emotionality." Beneath the depth of my friendship with Benazir, there would always be underwritten dilemmas of betrayal and manipulation that became exacerbated with the process of thesis writing. The moral asymmetry of being an ethnographer trying to comprehend personal and political journeys grew intense. The relative privilege to produce contexts and write about intimate lives that can be circulated and read, came at the cost of undermining and silencing relationships embodied in friendships and solidarities. The void and dejection of parting from the field and being left to reflect on the journeys of young women spilled into the loneliness of academic writing. I shuddered to think of being trapped in an anthropological epistemology where the ethnographer is expected to shut off the recorder and exit the field on time. At the same time, emotional attachments were to pass the test of ethical accountability as the risk of exaggeration or romanticisation remained an issue. For anthropologists, the obligation and responsibility to "reflect critically on the impact of the harsh images of human suffering" foisted in public is pertinent (Schepher-Hughes 1995: 416). Withdrawal and writing about the field, thus, became submerged in the question of how, as a feminist ethnographer in the Global South, I could navigate the in-between space of the personal and professional with accountability and collective responsibility.

In October 2018, Benazir's struggle with the dream to pursue higher education took an unsurprising turn when she got married. The groom's family was a distant relative who was known to Benazir's family through *beraderi* (kin group) networks. With just a few months into the distance learning programme she had signed up for, the inevitability of marriage was clear to both of us. We nurtured our friendship by exchanging books over weekends or catching up whenever she would visit her natal home. As she continued the distance learning undergraduate course, we tried to meet more often to organise reading material and study books before the semester exams. With Benazir's decision to embrace motherhood, she often talked about a sense of guilt for easily accepting what came her way. Her plans to initiate community-based mobilisation for education came to a halt. So did graduation. She was apprehensive about sharing the news of her marriage and motherhood with some of her schoolmates who had earlier been dismissive about her

> decision, calling it a "big mistake." To deal with anguish, shame, and the trouble of acceptance, Benazir would often ask in our conversations: "*Aapi,* would my life be any different if I had spoken up against decisions taken *for* me?" Her question reminded me of how guilt had engulfed both of us in different ways – morphing into feminist failure on some days, and turning into what she called "rage of conformity" on other days.

What happens when we fail, and what do we fall back on? As we continued to struggle with guilt and convoluted emotions that characterised our personal lives, the choices we made were embedded in deeply political questions. For Benazir, the struggle was centered in finding and reclaiming the self and voice, while for Madhulika, it was about dilemmas emerging from the self's quest with issues of representation in anthropological praxis. It was at this juncture that tracing the roots to honesty and sincerity of our friendship strengthened our resolve to continue the struggle with the institutions we inhabited. Could we move beyond the impasse by centering the challenges of the personal and professional in persistent political engagements? The essence of Virginia Dominguez's persuasive queries (2000) on seeking ways to incorporate and acknowledge love in intellectual, personal, and political life reinforced meaning into our search for answers. We do not suggest love as a rhetorical add-and-stir solution in the pedagogy of solidarity, nor do we intend to bypass the disparities of power and privilege shaping us. Instead, we aimed at tapping into insights from our friendship and fieldwork to create a long-lasting, persistent commitment towards feminist praxis. It also had a direct implication on navigations through patriarchal and neoliberal imaginaries of womanhood. The task of writing and advocacy, in our respective emotional spaces, became more fluid as we situated the inwardness of our experiences with the social and political frictions continuing around us. It was the resilience of women around us that guided and informed the set of practices we undertook. To be able to engage with the transformative potential of methodological and practical forms of solidarity, we seek hope in what Richa Nagar and Roozbeh Shirazi (2019) call "radical vulnerability."

Catharsis and Crises

> *Notes from "a" ShaheenBagh, January 2020*
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> **B**: Following a series of conversations at home on the Citizenship Amendment Act, I finally joined the anti-CAA sit-in protest at Inderlok in the northern part of Delhi. My mother-in-law accompanied me to the protest, and we had collectively arrived at the decision to take along my 6-month-old daughter, Rehma. It was the beginning of the year 2020, and every single step we took on the sidewalk towards the protest venue left us with the thought, "now or never." The women of Shaheen Bagh had spearheaded the unthinkable in the political imagination of India: they stood against the state to speak and fight for their rights. In December 2019, after the state police violently stormed into the Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI) to suppress student-led protests against the citizenship laws, Shaheen Bagh, neighbouring JMI, had become the epicenter of protests against the CAA. The Act that made amendments to the citizenship law of 1955 reaffirmed the second-class status of Muslims in India. "Shaheen Bagh" spiralled into reciprocal chains and

crafted solidarities through protests led by students and women. In the span of a month, several *Shaheen Baghs* had emerged in the capital and all across the country. In Delhi, the Muslim neighbourhoods became symbolic of resistance as there were sit-in protests organised in Azad Market and *Shahi Eidgah* in Old Delhi, *Seelampur* in Northeast Delhi, *Nizamuddin* in Central Delhi, *Hauz Rani* in South Delhi, and Inderlok. At the Inderlok protest, as we reached in the evening after finishing household chores, an activist visiting from the ShaheenBagh protest was leading sloganeering. Reading Fahmida Riaz's poetry on my way to the protest venue had become a habit. Some days it would be *Farhang-e-Nau*[9] playing in my head, and sometimes her words from *Kotwal* (The Interrogator) promised catharsis on lonely metro rides:

If possible I shall do it better
We shall write that word again
To make every dictator equipped with his armory
Tremble upon reading that word
We shall play that tune again
To make every victim of oppression,
With hands folded,
Dance to its rhythm. (Fahmida Riaz, Trans. by R. Ahmad 1991)

We continued to come to the protest site in the days to come, often coordinating with our relatives who lived in the neighborhood, and staying till late evening. To protect Rehma from biting cold weather, my relatives who lived close to the protest venue would offer to babysit her at their home. On days when the fatigue of marriage, motherhood, domestic responsibilities, and traveling took over, I would remind myself of the time spent at the Rainbow Play School *majlis* in 2017. Amidst the anguish towards Islamophobic accounts on social media, every woman I met spoke about the warmth of the networks of care she built there. My cousin's sisters from Shaheen Bagh also had insights to share about the magnitude of the protest in their part of the city, and I believed every Shaheen Bagh carried potential for the transformative politics that the modern nation-state needed.

M: ShaheenBagh had punctured the discourse on Muslim women – finally rupturing the popular projections of Muslim women as homogeneous, veiled, and voiceless. As an anthropologist grappling with questions of representation while researching *with* Muslim women, the Shaheen Bagh protests denoted the complex workings of crisis and emergence. For women who had long battled these imaginaries inflicted upon them, I return to the issue raised earlier by Benazir. Could the articulation of voice and opposition be really considered unprecedented in the case of Muslim women in India? Did we really not want to "listen" to their voices before this, or, to put it in other words, were we only keen to listen to those speaking on behalf of Muslims in India? The image of ordinary Muslim women dissenting by claiming public space did not fit with the imaginaries already prevalent. While on the one hand Muslim women were thought to be controlled and in need of

[9] https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=79bvIGO5kk4

rescue by the state, the same women were now depicted as "disruptors" of urban elite life.[10] Over the three months of continuous protest by the women of Shaheen Bagh, the persistence and resilience to fight for dignity and equal existence were rooted in sisterhood, solidarities, and practical modes of becoming and belonging. This kind of feminist praxis contested the state-assigned identifications and hegemonic colonial constructs.

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Friendship as a method does not come with a smooth, easy-going pathway. Incorporating risk, vulnerability, and emotions in anthropological practice and everyday relations is a conflict-ridden journey. We have attempted to situate abruptions of the year 2020 using disjointed experiences drawn together from our friendship. We situate friendship as the ground to unpack the realities and experiences that led to the making of the revolutionary movement of 2020 in the Indian context. We look back at the grainy political and personal memories that go into the making of "the archive." In reflecting together as co-writers and friends, the incoherence of our struggles brought us closer to each other's humanity, oppression, and responsibility. As we both take stock of a relationship that emerged in the field, we note that the solidarity politics finds its roots in the destabilization of neat epistemological frameworks and institutional boundaries. While rewinding the events through which a revolutionary movement becomes visible to the world, we were compelled to critically reflect and reconsider the implications of political choices on academic, advocacy, and everyday life. Even as we both struggled to find our way through the feminist friendship that we had envisioned, we embraced the discomfort of acknowledging emotions such as guilt, risk, failure, fear, and concern for each other's well-being. Our friendship is entrenched in the making of a revolutionary archive that is grounded in our political commitment to resist colonial structures in the academy and social life. We hope to grow and nurture the transformative potential of our friendship through an ongoing quest with feminist praxis.

[10] https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/your-right-to-protest-sacrosanct-but-it-shouldn-t-cause-problem-to-others-mediators-tell-shaheen-bagh-protesters-120022001143_1.html

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