ASA 2018 Pol10: Dalits and other stigmatised groups

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Imagining an Alternative Modernity: Islamic Reformism in Rural India and Liberal Models of Change

We had never seen such a display of discipline in the village. We stepped out of our rooms, peeked around trees, walked across paddies and climbed on rooftops to get the best view of the spectacle. It was the arrival of the girl students from one of the Al Hilal Mission Schools, to attend the opening ceremony of a new branch here in Joygram[1], a Muslim majority village in rural West Bengal. The girls were brought in a rented passenger bus, which had been parked deliberately a few hundred meters from the school, and now the girls were walking in perfect rows of two towards the school, all meticulously dressed in the same pale blue *churidars*, with a pristine white scarf covering their hair.

A ripple of awe went through the village. It felt like this parade, with its organised aesthetics, was bringing order to the chaos of rural life in India. This was the future – the opportunity that now lay within reach for the villagers, a future of order and cleanliness.

Now Muslim girls would become engineers, doctors, politicians. Now Muslims would no longer lag behind. Now also *Bengali* Muslims would be proper Muslims, on the right path. Now also *Muslim* Bengalis would become the respectable Indian citizens they aspired to be.

The Muslim population in India experiences discrimination and stigmatisation. As made shockingly plain in the Sachar Committee Report (2006) and repeatedly afterwards in governmental and nongovernmental evaluations, the development levels of Muslims are far below the national average. A variety of factors play a role, including discrimination of Muslims by governmental agencies and other employers and a vicious circle of poverty and lack of means to access educational or other means for upward mobility. Muslims are also stigmatised as 'backward' and traditional and are sometimes blamed for their own underdevelopment. As elsewhere in the world, practising Muslims are stereotyped as the anti-thesis to secular, liberal modernity at best and as potentially radical extremists as worse. The picture I have just sketched of the proud reception of a girls' school aimed at educating girls to become engineers and lawyers suggests a more complex situation. What can the awe stirred by the Islamic Mission school tell us about the future Muslim Bengalis imagine?

Drawing on two years ethnographic fieldwork, I suggest that the material injustices and ideological exclusion experienced by my Muslim Bengali interlocutors' inspires engagement with Islamic reformism, particularly with the Tablighi Jamaat, and I furthermore argue that the local expression of Islamic reformism is not a withdrawal or rejection of the Indian nation-state, or of secularism, liberalism, or modernity altogether, but rather merges assimilation and rejection as it offers the imagination and practice of an 'alternative modernity'; a modernity that is ethical and just, and

[1] All names are pseudonyms, excepts for names of public persons and institutions that are not incriminated by the information shared.

draws on both rational and transcendental resources, and combines local and global, political and religious elements.

In Joygram, Islamic reformism finds expression in ways that emerge out of the locally particular virtue ethics which merges Islamic theology and practice and South Asian ideas of being and sociality; is informed by the political economic environment of post-communist West Bengal and secular India; and resonates with globally circulating models of modern personhood. These various elements become encompassed in *dharma*. *Dharma* is a term usually associated with Hinduism, but in common Bengali parlance *dharma* denotes a holistic ethics of justice and order that any human being is expected to live with by virtue of being human, whether Hindu, Muslim, or otherwise, and without *dharma* one is not really human. The semantic and aesthetic expression of the multifaceted *dharma* in this case is Islamic, because Joygrami Muslims are essentialised in the Muslim *jāti* (community) from birth and continuously throughout their lifetime.[2] So, the project of Islamic reformism in not limited to religious reform, but is a holistic, all-encompassing moral regeneration project to overcome stigmatisation and materialise a better future.

I discuss the various elements in this complex amalgam, and the reasons for their emergence, and will finally return to the Islamic Mission Schools as one the most successful materialisations of the imagined future.

First, the political economic context. For Bengali Muslims, Indian modernity does not offer the equally distributed increase in wellbeing that was promised, instead they are faced with continued marginalisation by an exploitative capitalism, corrupt and violent party-politics, a malfunctioning judicial system, and continued stigmatisation.

So, despite a relentless faith in the promises of secular modernity, somewhere along the way things went wrong in the eyes of most Joygramis, and there are two entangled critiques.

Firstly, the purportedly modern government fails to live up to its ideals. Secularism 'isn't happening' (*hochche na*) in 'Hindustan'. Note that Nehruvian secularism – *dharmanirapekṣatā* in the vernacular – means 'neutrality of religion': instead of absence of religion it denotes equal treatment and opportunity of all citizens no matter their religious identity, and the safeguarding of harmony between all religious groups.

Secondly, the development that does take place (and there is an increase in disposable income and access to services) is seen to go hand in hand with a problematic *kind* of modernization as Westernization. Western liberalism supposedly drives unbridled individualism and consumerism, leading to social fragmentation, greed, and a decline of *dharma*. Traditional networks of support and exchange are interrupted or undermined by the market economy, while the state benefits meant to fill the gaps often fail to reach those in need. The questionable communism of the West Bengal state government didn't help: three decades of communist rule bankrupted the state not only financially, ultimately stagnating development, but also morally, for its rejection of *dharma* left

[2] Because of the secular logic of the Indian nation-state and local cosmogonic ideas. See for a more detailed discussion Pool (2016).

politics and the economy without moral direction. Besides a market economy and corrupt politics, modernisation in the eyes of my interlocutors has become synonymous with a total sense of moral degradation not only in higher echelons of power but affecting every villager. Ordinary people can't escape the vicious cycles of corruption and violence, and poor, uneducated Muslims have been vulnerable to partaking in immoral practices, leading to a deep sense of moral failure of not only the state but also the community and the self.

The fears for social fragmentation and moral degradation and the experience of exclusion do not, however, eliminate a desire for modernisation and inclusion. Joygrami Muslims still strive after the goods the modern democracy promises but fails to deliver. Good development in Joygram means not only economic progress but advancement in society, attaining substantive citizenship and civility. This kind of development is firmly placed within, rather than in opposition to *dharma*.

Dharma does not stand in a mutually irreconcilable opposition to secular democracy or a capitalist economy; rather, it sets the moral foundations and limits: according to my interlocutors, following *dharma* means treating Muslims and Hindus as equal humans in the deliverance of government services; it means being honest in business transactions; it means both rich and poor can access education. Yet the fear of losing *dharma*, and the lack of space for navigation Muslims have because they are reified in the Islamic community (thus disenfranchised from the voice of the secular citizen) has led to the emergence of a counter-narrative: development as the 'upliftment' of the community from its 'backward' position in society is firmly embedded in modern interpretations of *dharma* cast in terms of Islamic reformism. Since the state cannot be trusted to either deliver development or provide moral guidance, and since Muslims, as the minority, are often blamed for their own underdevelopment, they have taken responsibility into their own hands to become better people, better Muslims, and hopefully, eventually, better modern citizens.

In this context, the Islamic movement Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) is stepping into the sense of moral failure and exclusion experienced by Bengali Muslims, drawing on the idiom of all-encompassing *dharma* to draw on and challenge local notions of self and sociality, and to incorporate rationalized religious conviction and modern civility. Stigmatised in the public sphere, reformist Muslims aim for individual reform rather than collective mobilization, through techniques of the self (both religious practice and modern education) that promises liberation from the 'backward' past and modern personhood. Islamic Mission School are a hallmark of this imagined future.

This kind of reform of the self resonates with a globally circulating model of personhood that is at the core of the project of modernity: a person equipped with self-determination and -making (the right – and duty – to be true to oneself, including moral responsibility) and inner conviction (embodying immanence, individualism and authenticity).[3] Whereas in many modernisation theories, as well as in everyday discourse, Islam in particular, often appears as the tradition that chains one to pre-modern way of life and therefore incompatible with modern secularism, Islamic

[3] My understanding of these terms draws on a wide range of literature including: Asad 2003; Berman 1982; Giddens 1990; Keane 2007; Mahmood 2005; Milbank and Pabst 2016; Stacey 2018; Taylor 1989, 2004. See for a more detailed discussion Pool (forthcoming).

reformism is a catalyst of the modern ethics of conviction not unlike secular modernisation projects.

This modern model of personhood operates in combination with local notions of personhood, freedom, and ethical autonomy. The ethical potential of *dharma* is captured in the concept *gyan*, which is usually translated as wisdom, but is better understood as a dynamic, situational practical reasoning, comparable to the Aristotelian concept *phronesis*, as it denotes the very ability to think autonomously and critically, and particularly to make moral assessments. The potential for *gyan* emerges, intricately bound up with a visceral habitus of faith (*imān*), in the process of becoming a human person within networks of sociality and in submission to the divine. *Gyan* is subsequently cultivated through a constant process of becoming, in interaction with others and through informal and formal moral teachings. Rather than being entirely constrained by static religious doctrine, it is *gyan* and a habitus of faith, together, that form the cornerstones of the modern ethics of conviction.

In secular thought, reason is often thought to be limited by religious or cultural tradition, and in this trend practitioners of Islam may be stigmatized as 'irrational'. But in Joygram, reason is *enabled* by sociality embedded in religious tradition. In drawing on *gyan* as the source of self-determination and conviction, reformist Muslims embrace a personhood that is at once deeply embedded in transcendence and in modernity. As such it disregards modern categorisations of secular reason versus religious spirituality, or of religion, politics, and the economy as separate spheres, because *gyan* is also the enabler of secular civility.

In seeking to expunge a sinful and pre-modern past, the Tablighi Jamaat balances a rationalisation of religious practices with an Islamic ethics of equality, solidarity, and humility to counter radical individualism and consumerism. For instance, Tablighi Jamaat members advocate withdrawal from various forms of traditional exchange, such as the dowry, because they are considered unreasonable ánd because have become a display of conspicuous consumption and hierarchical relationships.

So, through participation in the Tablighi Jamaat and the education at the Islamic Mission Schools, Joygrami Muslims seek to at once overcome their stigmatisation as unworthy of substantive citizenship in the secular modern state, and to reform the actual practices within that same state.

I briefly discuss one good example: education. According to Joygramis, a lack of education does not only mean a lack of literacy but also a lack of moral cultivation. Equally vice versa, education is not only the site of religious teaching but also the site of the production of the modern citizen who has access to a wide range of opportunities. In their eyes, the state fails to deliver education that is of sufficient quality to actually increase the opportunities of this rural community, nor does it cultivate moral persons. The West Bengal state in particular has attempted to pacify the Muslim community's call for better education by creating state-sponsored madrasas. However, these schools do not satisfy the aspirations: they are thought to be of even lower quality than regular government schools, the madrasas name on the certificate may exclude them from higher educational institutions, and simply offering Arabic classes is not educating children to become moral citizens, let alone civilised modern citizens.

In contrast, the Mission Schools are hugely popular in rural as well as urban areas and they are successful in the creation of a Muslim middle-class. These are educational institutions organized by the Muslim community. The phenomenon started with one Al-Ameen Mission School in Howrah in 1986; in 2009 it had 32 branches across the state (Gupta 2009: 126 – 166). The model has been copied by several other initiators, who have again branched out, such as the Al-Hilal Mission Schools. The schools follow the curriculum of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education complemented with a minimum of Islamic subjects. The most important and distinguishing aspect of the mission schools is not their curriculum but their strict regimen and discipline, and the seamless inculcation of an Islamic disposition within the larger project of the making of the modern Muslim citizen.

In January 2013, a girls-only branch of the Al-Hilal Mission School opened in Joygram. The very presence of this school, and most evidently the speeches at the ceremonial opening day, sparked a particular discourse on the marginalisation of Muslims in the nearby villages. Central to the ideology of the school is the 'backwardness' of Muslims and the need to 'uplift' the Muslim community in order to make them respectable and participatory citizens for the betterment of the Indian democracy as a whole. The renewed emphasis on Islam, together with the rejection of Western notions of freedom can give the impression that Muslims reject development and modernity altogether, and that their notions of what constitutes a valuable life are incompatible with secular modernity. But the Islamic Mission Schools are the hallmark of development in the broader sense discussed above: fusing *dharma* and modern civility, they are key to developing an alternative modernity among Muslims.

To end, I briefly reflect on the implications of these observations for international development and justice paradigms that aim to support the emancipation of stigmatised and marginalised groups. There is increasing recognition that local values, including religion, should play an important role in the development process. However, religion is still considered something one should be enabled to engage in, rather than an inseparable part of a much broader ethical framework, a framework, in fact, that *enables* other aspects of development. The felt disregard of local or traditional ways of life feeds into a backlash against the imposition of liberalism by a disconnected elite, including, at times, a disregard of universal human rights agreements or a rejection of liberal development paradigms that emphasise freedom and choice, in expressions as varied as alt-right populist parties and some Islamic movements. The Joygrami variant of Islamic reformism is a mild backlash and may or may not be the means to ultimately achieving human rights and development for all, including women. This would depend on who has the power, and at the moment the power is predominantly in the hands of men who can easily establish a monopoly in the vacuum left by the state. Ideally, there would be more dialogue with all stakeholders, including girls. But any dialogue with those in power, on more equality for women, for instance, especially when it concerns an already stigmatised group, should start with respect for the sources for moral change and avoid the assumption that those sources would have to lay outside religion. In this case, in one were to advocate development towards more freedom and choice for women, one has to acknowledge that the source of freedom and choice is in *gyan*, and that a rejection of divine submission would mean a counterproductive rejection of the freedom to

reason altogether. Only on that basis does one respect the human dignity of all involved, avoid backlash, and be effective in the liberation from marginalisation.

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