

BOOK REVIEW

Making place for Muslims in contemporary India

By Kalyani Devaki Menon. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022. 196 pp.

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Menon's book is one of the rare ethnographies of India's religious configuration that differently echoes the courage and clarity of Mathur's (2008) *The Everyday Life of Hindu Nationalism*. It vividly describes what Muslims experience in contemporary India: a reign of terror manifest, among others, in their being routinely lynched (also filmed) and their lives destroyed in the name of "counterterrorism." In the shadow of post-9/11 terrorism discourse, which is all-pervasive in India because it is internationalized by the American empire and its props, 35 percent of the police force view it as "natural" (p. 16) to lynch Muslims. Lynching often occurs on the pretext of Muslims being accused of "cow slaughter," a Hindu term—indeed, a "combat concept" developed from the work of Reinhart Koselleck—because it displaces the question of citizens' dietary freedom. The reign of terror forces Muslims to suppress their real names and present themselves as Hindus (p. 32). Notably, throughout her absorbing tale, Menon remains attentive to her interlocutors' world: a world in which Muslims confront everyday indignity and institutionalized discrimination. Yet the people she worked with nurse hope for a better morrow.

This monograph is about the Muslims of Old Delhi, an emblem of precolonial Mughal India. With India's colonization, the British built New Delhi, which became the national capital. New Delhi was the site of Menon's doctoral fieldwork with women of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—a paramilitary outfit committed to establishing ethnic Hindu supremacy and whose overt advocates have ruled India since the 2014 parliamentary elections. The book draws on her postdoctoral fieldwork undertaken after 2012. It is based on interviews with 50 women and 50 men of Old Delhi, with the anthropologist herself stationed in a posh Hindu neighborhood, Defense Colony, in New Delhi (pp. 27, 156).

The question Menon asks is

How do Indian Muslims make place for themselves in a country in which they are routinely cast as security threats—as potential militants ... as ambiguous subjects with questionable national

allegiance, or as a community driven by religious impulses that keeps India from realizing its global aspirations? (p. 33)

Menon argues that Muslims "make place" by "disrupting majoritarian constructions of India as a Hindu place that positions upper-caste Hindus as the normative national subject" (p. 4). With religion as an *arche*, in Leibniz's sense, citizenship, belonging, and nationalism constitute the intertwined analytic that informs Menon's lucid prose. This *arche*, however, works contradictorily, since Muslims become at once more than and less than visible.

As is evident from the book's title, space is at the core of Menon's project. Defining place as culturally inscribed space (p. 18), she highlights religious practices that concern place-making, including views about India as a nation-space. Drawing on her carefully crafted fieldwork narratives, Menon argues that Muslims are not only Muslims; they are also *Dillivāle*, people of Delhi. Hence, their affiliation to Delhi as a place is irreducible to that which is "religious." Moving from a negative to an affirmative assertion, she urges scholars to shift their focus from religious difference toward how actors make "place for themselves amid and across difference" (p. 4). Here, Menon deploys the idea of a "cultural commons" (p. 20), a term used by anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran. Menon takes it as an obverse of "culturalism," which stresses "insurmountable difference." In its place, she proposes to account for practices and narratives that "transcend religious boundaries" (p. 27).

Menon illustrates place-making early on in the introduction through the figure of Farhana *bājī*, a woman whose husband died during her fieldwork. Farhana once asked Menon not to leave her house until the evening (*maghrib*) *azān* for prayer had finished. She explained that because the spirits (*rūḥ*) of Muslim martyrs (*shohda*) also walk to pray, stepping out would obstruct their path. To Farhana *bājī*, her centuries-old, tattered house was safe thanks to the blessings (*barka/t*) of Allah, as was Old Delhi itself—even from earthquakes. Such acts and narratives, Menon contends, inscribe Old Delhi as a locality and place of belonging.

Chapter 1 is a telling tale—listened to with great empathy and described in rich detail—of disempowerment and discrimination, both structural and cultural. An Urdu journalist-editor, Ballimaran's Aamir Sahab, told Menon that while Hindus living for centuries chose to leave the unprosperous Old Delhi, “no school has opened here since 1947” (p. 40). This chapter also offers an incredibly faithful account of experiences of and stories by Muslims as objects of securitization and wanton targets of counterterrorism.

Titled “Gender and Patriarchy,” chapter 2 dwells on how women from diverse backgrounds navigate the neoliberal economy, including Shī'a and Sunni (and Bareilvi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-ḥadīs within); educated and uneducated, un-/underemployed and employed. Saiba *bāji* was a Zardozi worker who embroidered women's dresses. With four uneducated children, she labored harder after her husband became unfit to work and eke out a living for the family. The work by her and her children included carving the religious symbol of “Om” on Hindu wedding dresses (p. 65). Menon gainfully connects the informal economy most women worked in to the international division of labor and capital.

The next chapter continues Menon's encounter with women who, under a declared Hindu majoritarianism, engage—diversely and critically—with their faith, also employing resources from international contexts. The issues range from veiling, piety, marriage/divorce, *maslak* (school of thought) to the Qur'an and more. Chapter 4 discusses Old Delhi's Shī'a community, which forms 10 percent of Muslims, who nationally constitute 14.23 percent of India's population (p. 116). This chapter aims to account for “sectarian tension” (p. 115) as well as bonds that connect Sunnis, Shī'as, and Hindus alike. To index the former, she quotes a Shī'a interlocutor saying that they “would rather live in a Hindu-majoritarian state than a Sunni one” (p. 119). As for the latter, Menon documents that some employees of Panja Sharīf (a Shī'a *dargāh* at Kashmiri Gate where the annual Muḥarram procession culminates) were also Sunni. They worked there because of their love for Husain, son of Imam Hazrat 'Alī and a symbol par excellence of martyrdom and justice. Another example is an imam trained at the *dargāh* who says that “in the house of Husain meet people of all persuasions. They may be Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian” (p. 131). The final chapter discusses the rituals of mourning, focusing on Farhana *bāji*'s husband's funeral. Menon reads diverse views about it as acts of place-making, for Muslims contest “both the Middle East-centric scholarship on the Muslim world and the Hindu-centric view of India in the world” (p. 158).

Theoretically, the book is organized around the term “cultural commons.” It seems to me, however, that it is insufficiently thought through. In part, this stems from Visweswaran's (2010) own account of it in *Un/common Cultures*, which Menon

cites. Invoking the works of Aijaz Ahmad, Etienne Balibar, and others, while her critique of racism or neoracism as culturalism appears cogent, Visweswaran rarely unveils the term's theoretical foundation, including its conceptual purchase and methodological efficacy. How, for instance, are cultural commons (de)formed? Its one dominating example in Indian anthropology is Veena Das's suggestion to foreground “folk theology” rather than syncretism. But beyond phraseological change, Das's move too is enmeshed in and stamped by Indian/Hindu nationalism (Ahmad, 2023a). Like Das's premise of Hinduism as inherently indigenous and Islam as foreign, “Ganga-Jamuni culture” as cultural commons broached by Menon (p. 143) inscribes, unwittingly or otherwise, rather than critically analyze nationalist epistemology (Ahmad, 2023b). Viewed from this perspective, while Menon's conceptual attack on Indian/Hindu “exclusionary nationalism” (e.g., 138) is brilliant, the premise of “inclusive nationalism” is not. Political philosophy tells us that the nation-state is constitutively exclusive. So is democracy and its five-yearly, dollarized spectacle of voting, in which Menon and her interlocutors find hope (p. 159 ff.). Since democracy too is national, the solution itself emerges with a vengeance as a problem. Menon herself alludes to this as follows: she notes that “existing hegemonies have infiltrated the most intimate realms of ... being” of women like Ameena *bāji*'s (p. 57). Academic vocabulary too is unsafe from such an obscene hegemony because we too deploy its terms like “South Asia,” “sect” (originally a Christian term, deployed to understand Sunni-Shī'a relations), and “cow slaughter.”

Given the continuing, even growing, discourse of the national as rational (in which anthropologists and nonanthropologists alike partake), my critique here is immanent and reflexively collective, not individual. In that spirit, let me conclude by noting that Menon goes beyond customary notes on “self-reflexivity” in anthropological works and indeed presents instructive glimpses of how and when her fieldwork encounter transformed her: both intellectually and personally (pp. 24–27, 56). On this count, as well as on others noted above, Menon's book significantly departs from the dominant trend not only in anthropology but in contemporary scholarship on Muslims in the subcontinent at large. It deserves not only to be widely read but also engaged with by scholars beyond anthropology.

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