
Behind the Veil: Lives of Muslim Women in Behrampada, in Mumbai

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INTRODUCTION

Mumbai, the commercial capital of India, is a city of stark contrasts with its high rise buildings and dirty shanty towns. Carved out of an archipelago of seven fishing islands, the city has developed into a pre-eminent industrial and financial hub. Its boundless economic opportunities attract waves of migrants from across the country. Shaped by many migrant communities, the city represents a unique blending of many people, cultures, religions and languages. In this city of opportunities, stories of rags to riches could be real life stories. However the burgeoning influx of migrants has resulted in a perennial housing shortage. So great is the space constraint that 54 percent of people in Mumbai live in slums. Many of these slums have developed on wasteland.

The houses, cobbled together with makeshift materials of tin, asbestos or zinc sheets, provide imperfect protection for people from natural or man-made disasters. Without proper water supply, electricity, sanitation facilities, life in slums of Mumbai can be extraordinarily difficult amidst dirty lanes and overflowing gutters, especially when these slums are seen as illegal. This dismal picture of overcrowded and congested areas does not reveal the whole story. For beneath these images, are also stories of courage and endurance, of human inventiveness and energy: The slum is a beehive of activity—where people work day and night in a wide variety of economic enterprises.

The continuous swirl of activities in these slums, perhaps justify Mumbai's claim as a city that never sleeps. It is a place where survival can only be possible through cooperation and sharing of resources; but also a place where conflicts can erupt in a moment. The lives of Muslim women that I wish to portray in the essay are set in one such slum called Behrampada.ⁱ These are lives lived behind the veil—the identity marker of Muslim women.

Drawing the veil from these lives, the study portrays the everyday struggles and concerns of women who live in Behrampada. The importance of this enquiry is because it indicates the ways by which women's lives are circumscribed by their religious and gender identities. It reveals the failures in developing planning and execution.ⁱⁱ The narrative is set against the ethnographic and socio-economic backdrop of the area. Studies such as this reveal the growing disparities that exist in India's financial capital. This was a city that held promise of a better life for many migrants who entered it in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The transition in economy from manufacturing to service and tertiary sector employment excludes those with different skills.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Behrampada is a notified slums located in Bandra (East). Planned as a mid-town commercial complex, Bandra (East) is one of the fastest growing suburbs. Symbolizing the contradictions of Mumbai, Bandra (East) has upper middle-class housing colonies (for artists, journalists, writers, etc.), government/commercial complexes and slums. Plans are afoot to shift the diamond and the wholesale cloth market to the area. Located nearby, Behrmapada is spread over an area of ten acres, adjacent to the railway tracts from Mahim Creek to Khar Station. Built partly on railway land and government land, this predominantly Muslim slum has attracted migrants from across the country. Indicating this rich diversity of Muslim culture, the land has about ten mosques and one Madarasa. There is also a church nearby in Behramnagar and a temple opposite the Bandra court.

Behrampada has a population of 49,829 persons living in tenements constructed with asbestos, tin and zinc sheets as well as a few brick houses. It has grown along open gutters and narrow alleys with naked electric wires hanging

dangerously overhead. So great is the space constraint that additional structures are precariously perched over the original ground level tenements so that not ray of sunlight filters down to the narrow streets and overflowing drains. It has only one partially motor able road. The rest of the area is connected by narrow by-lanes; sometimes with sleepers placed over drains. This neglect by civic administration is because it is an unplanned settlement built on railway and state government land.

Named after a Parsi gentleman named Behramji, who originally owned the land, its metamorphosis into a shanty town can be traced to the economic and migration history of Mumbai. Behrampada in the 1950s was an uninhabitable and worm-infested marshland. As migrants from different parts of the country came to Mumbai in search of work, these workers became squatters on available wasteland. Recalling the growth story of Behrampada, one of the earliest residents, 70-year old Jamitabi said that in the 1950s the area was wasteland. Gradually four squatters built their huts in the area--one of them was a Christian, the other a Hindu and two were Muslims. By the 1960s, other settlers came and reclaimed the marshlands. They made the place habitable by the sheer dint of their hard-work, since they had to cart mud from distant places to fill the marshland.ⁱⁱⁱ It was a collective effort. For a very long time, Behrampada did not have either electricity or water or an approach road.

So when the first water tap came into the shanty area, during one of the election campaigns, the moment was recorded to posterity by naming the street 'NullwaliGulli'. In course of time, many of the makeshift shacks gave way to partially bricked houses extended with tin and asbestos sheets. Shops and establishments grew in the area. Several Muslim artisans came and started their traditional crafts of block printing, *zari* and embroidery work, readymade garments, costume jewellery and carpentry. The area now has electricity, water taps, common latrines, a ration shop and telephone connections. It was only after a span of 40 years, since the first settlement in Behrampada, that the slum became a legalized slum inhabited by the working class and a sprinkling of the lower middle class people.

The reason why people want to live here is because of its convenient location mid-point between South Mumbai, the commercial downtown and North Mumbai suburbs as well as Central Mumbai; and because it is easily connected by the public transport system,

making travel to different parts of the city easy. Since Behrampada is on prime land, there is a lot of pressure to evict slum dwellers. Claiming the land belongs to them, the railway has planned to develop the land around Bandra railway terminus. The move is resisted by the local leader who, claiming that the land belongs to the Collector, got ration cards and photo identity passes issued to the residents. The dispute is pending in the Supreme Court. Consequently it remains one of the poorest slums in Mumbai with the single room houses (no bigger than 10X10feet) providing shelter for many families and children who defecate in the open gutters. It has never been benefited from any policies, resolution or any area development plan of government.

The residents are angry about the neglect of the area. They feel that the area could be developed, just as Kheranagar, the area adjacent to Behrampada, has been developed into a low income housing complex. They also resent the contrast between their homes and the well planned residential/commercial complexes developed in adjacent areas. They live in fear of fear eviction, since the land does not belong to them.

LIFE IN BEHRAMPADA

The residents are not necessarily illiterate, although many of them have dropped out of school. A number of them have middle school and high school education and a few have graduated and post-graduate degrees. Most of the residents are self-employed, although a few have regular jobs as social workers and teachers. The people work in a wide range of skilled and unskilled work. They include tailors, barbers, electricians, welders, metal fabricators, carpenters, painters, construction labourers, domestic workers, loaders and security guards. Men also work as bus drivers and conductors, auto drivers and taxi drivers. Very few have Government jobs.

During focus group discussions, women said that there was a time when a few men had jobs as a police constable, but this seems to be increasingly rare. Some men also find employment as *khanawalis* supplying food to downtown business centres. But by and large people are self-employed. Many of them have shops selling groceries, readymade garments, handbags and shoes.

These shops are retail outlets to the important industries in Behrampada, of manufacturing *zari* embroidered clothes for export to the Gulf countries, readymade garments, handbags, shoes

and bakery. The manufacturing of these products are undertaken in dimly lit room no larger than 10X12 sq. feet. At least 10 to 13 workers work through the day and sometimes through the night in these manufacturing units. These sweat shops do not have proper toilets or ventilation. While the units are usually situated on the first and second floors, the families stay on the top floor. Men working in the garment industry were involved in cutting and tailoring as well as the sale of the finished products. Young boys are generally involved in the sale of the readymade garments on Linking Road as many of the shops there are owned by Muslims.

The availability of work attracts migrants, usually from Gaya and Darbhanga districts of Bihar and Azamgarh District of Uttar Pradesh to Behrampada. These young men stay in groups of 14-15 in a small room (10x10) often above the work place (*kharkhanas*). The contractor arranges for them to stay there and decides on how much each person will pay as rent for the accommodation. When asked how so many people could survive in one room, the women during the focus-group discussion, said that the workers normally work a shift, so at any given time, there may be only 7-8 people in the room. If they can afford it, some of the workers rent out places independently. If they have relatives in the area, then they stay and eat with the family and contribute to the family income. It is also noticed that a large number of children are engaged in these industries.

HOUSEHOLDS

Due to space constraints, there are a wide range of household arrangements: while the majority of the residents live in nuclear households (comprising a married couple and their children), many households are joint. These joint families may include, parents, married sons, and their children; and sometimes, aunts, uncles and other relatives also share their homes. Since desertion and divorce are fairly common, there are a number of women-headed households i.e., divorced and widowed women living with their children. There are also a small minority of blended families, with married couples living with their children and step children.

The average number of family members in each tenement ranges from 7 to 9 members. It is also not uncommon for relatives and non-relatives visit them from their distant homeland.

The majority of the people live in poverty. The average household income of each family is between Rs. 5000-10000. There were a few who

reported an income between Rs. 20000-25000. But this does not mean that these families were well-to-do. While co-relating family size with household income, it was apparent that those who claimed higher income were those with more earning members. More importantly, these families with higher income did not necessarily eat better. The inference made was that these were households with petty businesses, who cut expenses on food, so that the money could be ploughed back into business.

Poverty therefore should be seen as a relative concept which does not necessarily conform to the official yardstick of measurement. The criterion for poverty measurement is unrealistically low and does not take into account the cost of living in an urban area. It also does not include the hidden costs of survival in an urban slum. These households pay an extremely high price for water, electricity and even to pee or defecate. The insanitary conditions of their lives make them susceptible to disease. So common are alimentary tract infection, that the people assume that it is normal. Additionally, diseases like TB, dengue and chikungunya are rampant. These conditions of their lives drag families in a vicious cycle of poverty and ill-health over generations. It deprives them of better educational and employment opportunities.

WOMEN'S LIVES

The lives of women like Samira, Hamidabi, Heena Begum, Ramola, Ramila, Mehrunissa and Sabeena are enacted against this backdrop.^{iv} Yet their lives are stories of resilience and determination. Samira, for instance, is a deserted woman in her thirties with two children. Picking up strands of her life, she works in an unconventional enterprise of tin surfacing on old vessels (*kalai*). As this is a successful business venture, she is able to employ young boys to do the actual work under her supervision. Similarly, Hamidabi and Ramola are domestic workers. Ramola's aim in life is to educate her two children. One of whom is going to school and the other, a toddler. When she goes to work she depends on her neighbours to keep an eye on her child. Hamidabi's responsibilities are greater, she lives in a blended family with her husband and co-wife and their six children. Since her husband and his first wife are ailing, the burden of providing for her family is entirely on her and her stepson who works as a salesman. She has managed to get two of her daughters married, but she still has the care of a mentally challenged son as well as the education of another son and a daughter.

In addition, she has to meet the medical expenses of her husband and his first wife's treatment. Heena Begum is a widow in her sixties, who lives with her married sons. A woman of considerable independence, she continues to work. Since she is no longer capable of hard work, she works for a paltry sum of Rs. 200 per month, by escorting two children to school. Ramila is a 30-year-old, deserted woman who has sought to create an independent life for her by starting a catering service. She supplies food to the migrant workers who also live in the area. Mehrunissa, who was married at 16 and had 10 children by the time she was 42; while, Sabeena runs a successful marriage bureau.

Apart from housework--of cooking, nurturing children, carrying water and buying provisions for the family-- these women also supplement the family income in many ways. Some of them work from home at piece-rate payment. It may involve assembling toys, which the woman may undertake with the help of neighbourhood children. Finishing a bag of whistles will fetch the woman Rs. 200 per day.

Women also undertake embroidering *zari* on saris and *salwar kameezes*, attaching sequins and beads on dresses, tailoring, block printing and making artificial jewellery items. Women also use their cooking skills to cook and supply food to the migrant workers living in the area. The migrant workers may be either living with or at a shelter provided by the contractor. Women sometimes find work as domestic workers and cooks in the nearby residential complexes. Their identity as Muslims makes it difficult to find domestic service in the nearby Hindu residential colonies.

Apart from the daily grind of their work, living in Behrampada means living under a looming threat of natural and man-made disasters. It was one of the flashpoints of the communal riots that erupted following the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. The area was also badly affected during the great deluge in Mumbai on 26 July 2005.

As if this weren't bad enough, the area faces imminent danger of fire that may be caused by imperfectly stored combustible materials or from short circuit caused by the over-hanging electric wires. This is what happened in the nearby settlement of Garib Nagar. The fire which gutted the area not only made a number of people homeless but also left them without any resources to fall back on. The hidden cost of such disasters is rarely recognized in development planning.

LIVING IN FEAR

The everyday life of women is overshadowed by the likelihood of such disasters. The threat of communal violence forces the Muslim communities to live together in ghettos. Even those families, who do own apartments in distant suburbs, prefer to live in Behrampada. Living together gives them a sense of security and provides them community support. This support is unlikely to be available if they move to a different neighbourhood, where they may be looked upon with suspicion because of their religious identity. This fall-out of the identity politics that characterizes socio-political landscape of Mumbai is fuelled by resurgent Hindu nationalism and enforced by global discourse on Muslim terror. Such discourses, not only ignite communal riots, but also lay grounds for various forms of discriminations experienced by the community. It makes it harder for the community to claim their citizenship rights and entitlements.

The pernicious impact of this polarization is that Muslim ghettos are neglected by the civic administration. Without proper water supply or good drainage and sanitation, this neglect has a long-term implication for the well-being of the community. Apart from ill-health, disease and morbidity, living with such deprivations, curtails opportunities and aspirations for socio-economic and educational development. Women, caught in the double bind of their religious and gender identity, face indifference and discrimination their everyday dealings--in the ration shop, schools and colleges, hospitals and health facilities and government offices.

The fear of communal violence that pervades at a subliminal level define women's lives. It restricts their mobility and impedes them from seeking out better educational and employment opportunities outside the neighbourhood. It enhances family and community controls over them. Forced to earn a living within the safe confines of their homes or in the neighbourhood, Muslim women are vulnerable to sexual and economic exploitations by the contractors and middle-men. They do not have the bargaining power to demand better wages. It prevents them from approaching the police in times of distress. Their confidence in police action is undermined by police surveillance, raids and arbitrary arrests to flush out potential terrorists. The consequence of this fear is that these women are reluctant to approach the police even if they suffer domestic violence or sexual harassment. The stress caused by the ever present threat of communal violence as well as

the struggle for survival in dehumanizing conditions increases male violence and control over women. Women also complained about alcoholism and drug abuse. So rampant are these abuses in the area, that women live in fear that their children may get enticed by the drug lords in the area. As the principal of a nearby minority school said:

“Behrampada is not a child-friendly area. Most of the parents wake up late in the day, sometimes around noon. The children come without having any breakfast. It is very common to see one or two children faint during the day due to lack of food. Very often, the teachers offer food from their own lunch boxes to these students. Besides, every year, during Ramzan, the teachers offer *zakht*, [i.e. a proportion of their salaries as charity], to feed these children.”

LIVING WITH DEPRIVATION

This implied criticism that women in Behrampada neglect their children should be seen in the context of their lives. These are women who work through the day to keep the kitchen fires going. They have no respite from the drudgery of the lives. They have to wake up at odd hours and stand in a public tap to collect water for their homes. Even a simple task of bodily excretion is a time consuming and dehumanizing chore. Women have to spend long hours outside a public lavatory to attend to these functions. Speaking bitterly of these experiences, women said that there were times when they end up soiling their clothes because of the delay. This stressful situation often breaks out into fist fights and slanging matches in front of the lavatories. In order to avoid this public humiliation women control themselves. This leads to urinary tract infection and gynaecological problems. The common toilets in the area are impossible to use. The paid toilets are expensive and are locked in the night. The community (particularly women) suffer from malnutrition, anaemia and morbidity. Falling prey to a variety of diseases, their life expectancy is low. Geographically located in poor areas, without basic amenities of adequate access to water sanitation and drainage, women face hardship in meeting the survival needs of their families.

Water, for instance, has to be brought from considerable distance. It is not that these women are not aware of the reasons for their ill-health. They are aware of the effects of poor sanitation and hygiene. Living in Behrampada is to live without a ray of sunlight entering their homes along with the unbearable stench from the

overflowing gutters and drains. The accumulated dirt is not cleared, because garbage collectors do not enter the slum and only collect waste thrown on the main road.

Further, since Behrampada is in a low-lying area, the situation during monsoons can best be described as a nightmare, with gutter water flooding into their homes and destroying their belongings. Given that these houses are poorly constructed without proper foundation, the residents can never be sure when these houses will collapse and kill them. The overhanging illegal electric wires are an additional threat, particularly during monsoons, when rain water seeping into the switchboard, could lead to a short circuit. The reason why households prefer illegal electricity even when they have a legal meter connection is because it works out cheaper. It means a saving on limited family financial resources.

It is the lack of resources that forces people to live in these areas. This lack of alternatives increases their vulnerability. The people live in such appalling conditions because its proximity to their places of work and the security of living within the protective cover of a community. This does not mean that women were not aware of the adverse consequence the filth in the area had on their health. They know that the existing water and air contamination caused wide spread diseases, which forces them to spend money on medical treatment. Despite the fact that using private facilities was very expensive and a strain on their scare household budget, they prefer these facilities to the public hospitals.

The most important reason for this was the overcrowding in government hospitals, the indifference of the service providers and the discrimination they face. The timing of outpatient departments was also unsuitable for working people. Going to the hospital means waste of a workday. No doubt, these experiences in government health care facilities have to be contextualized within the overall decline in health services, but it is also necessary to acknowledge their perceptions of discrimination.

They prefer local health providers from their own community, particularly for gynaecological problems. Although the majority of women do go to government hospital for their deliveries, many of the women do have their babies, particularly their second or third child, at home.

This is often because these women do not have a respite from their household duties for their deliveries. More importantly the reason is the

ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) for antenatal care does not extend to more than two deliveries. Women complained of overcrowding in government hospitals and the lack of proper care. They were subjected to humiliation by the care providers when in labour. They were sometimes assaulted or subjected to verbal abuse. Nurses sarcastically, remark while the women are in labour, “why scream now, you did not think of this when you enjoyed sex.” Private facilities were expensive and ill-equipped; while those who had home deliveries said that the mid-wife could not cope with birth related complications. But this does not mean that these women are not aware of the importance of birth registration.

Their poor health can be attributed to compromised immunity because of lack of nutritious food. These people especially women know the meaning of hunger and denial of food. In these inflationary times, these households are dependent on fair price shops for food commodities and in dire need of food subsidies. But not a single household in the area was eligible for a card that entitled it to food subsidies. This is because the benchmark determining poverty level is unreasonably low.

Here it is necessary to clarify that there is a difference between how rural and urban poverty are measured. In urban areas (unlike rural areas) there are no Below Poverty Line lists that entitle poor households to food subsidies. A household requiring subsidised food will have to apply for it. A case to point is the story of 52 year old Zulekha Bi who has lived in Behrampada since her marriage 25 years ago and has no known source of income. She survives precariously by doing odd jobs for her neighbours and they pay her accordingly. Zulekha's son was four years old when he contracted TB. Sometime later, he stepped on a nail; but no one paid attention to it thinking it to be a minor injury, until he developed a limp because of it. On another occasion, he fell out of a running train and sustained further injuries on his leg. At 25, he is disabled and unemployed. Asked whether he has tried for a job based on his physical disability, Zulekha replied in the negative. It is not clear whether he has applied under the government schemes for the disabled or is even aware of them.

During the floods of 2005, Zulekha lost most of her belongings. She had availed of the Government aid of Rs. 5000 to see her through and also received aid from religious bodies. After receiving this short-term assistance she is dependent on friends, relatives and her

neighbours for help. Since she has no known source of income, she has to depend on the good will of her neighbours for food and other kinds of help. Zulekha has both an orange ration card (which places her in the APL category) and a voter's card. The reason for Zulekha's exclusion is because she is not aware in the city of Mumbai the BPL card and the benefits of the Antodaya scheme is made available on demand unlike other parts of the country, where there is a BPL list prepared by the Local Self Government. There are women headed households without even a ration card which would entitle them to food commodities at controlled prices. These women who may be divorced/ widowed are often unable to get their previous marital families in their hometowns to release the necessary documents by which they can acquire a new card.

Women must be allowed to produce the documents either their parental or marital homes. Currently, there were also no standard guidelines for the issuing of ration cards. The rationing officer is often arbitrary in his decision and in the interpretation of rules. There were Government Regulations regarding the rules for issuing ration cards and BPL cards, but these are not known to the implementing agencies or the people.

ASPIRATION AND DESPAIR

The women look to education as a way out of this abysmal poverty. A look at their household expenses indicates that education of children is a major expense. These women want English education and vocational/professional education for their children. Although municipal schools offer free education, women are forced to send their children to tuition classes because the quality of teaching is bad. Those who can afford, send their children to private English schools. A careful scrutiny of school records in the neighbouring schools reveal that families send their sons to private and aided schools. Many of these children drop out of these schools in the higher classes and some of them may appear privately for their school leaving certificates. By and large, girls are sent to municipal schools. These schools lack basic facilities. The lack of functioning toilets and drinking water discourage pubescent girls attending schools. The teaching is lack lustre and classroom practices do not encourage children to learn. The text books are not designed in ways to make children want to learn. Teachers are absent for long periods of time and it is common for parents to hear that nothing was taught in school that day as the

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teacher was absent. Complaining about the poor standard of education, the women said a child in grade V does not even know the alphabets of the English language. Most of the children were promoted to the next class, even before they had learnt the prescribed syllabus of their previous class.

An equally distressing aspect is that many teachers share some of the prevailing prejudices against Muslims. These prejudices surface in their interactions with their Muslim students. A child who was absent from school for a few days because of ill-health was told by his teacher, "I am sure you did not come to school because you had to attend your father's second marriage." Feeling insulted the child refused to go to school. The rising cost of professional and technical education is a matter of concern to women. They see no way out of the situation they are in. They are disillusioned with un-kept promises made during elections, and know that the so called development benefits for minorities will not reach the people of Behrampada. A common complaint heard was that who has the time and energy to access these schemes. None of them had benefitted through the Maulana Azad Employment loan and the Maulana Azad Higher Education loans. They also considered the process of getting scholarships or loans difficult and lengthy and said that they could ill afford to lose a day's wage to attend to the paper work. The lack of proper documents, make it difficult for them to apply for the schemes. They are not aware of the various poverty alleviation programmes and schemes, such as ration cards for BPL families, or Other Backward Caste certificates.

The essay has sought to provide glimpses of lives behind the veil in Behrampada. These are survivors, who fight against insurmountable odds to carve a better life for themselves and their families. Caught in the double bind of gender and religious identities, these women find that opportunities for an improved quality of life are restricted.

They ask for very little from the state and yet not attempt is made to improve their lives. Talking about Garib Nagar fire, we asked one of the affected women about the help she received from the government after the fire. She replied that the authorities were very considerate to them. It turned out, what she saw as administrative help was because she and her family were allowed to live on the pavement for 10 days without harassment. This one statement perhaps captures the entire pathos of their lives.

END NOTES

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ⁱⁱThis portrayal is drawn from my research *Multi-Sectoral Development Deficits: Behrampada* (2011) commissioned by the Department of Minority Development, Government of Maharashtra. The study undertaken by the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNTD Women's University, Mumbai, aimed at examining development deficits in Behrampada used three layers of analysis: 1) An examination of policies and programme governing community entitlements to food, health, education, livelihood, basic amenities (to housing, water, sanitation and electricity) and security concerns of the community; 2) contacting key service providers in the municipal ward offices, teachers, health workers and local ration shops etc. to determine the obstacles in the delivery systems; and 3) contact with the target population, through in-depth interviews of 250 households and focussed group discussions.

ⁱⁱⁱ This narration of the history of Behrampada is drawn from Agnes, Flavia. 1993. "Behrampada, A Besieged Basti." *Manushi* (73-74). Pp.10-12.

^{iv} Names are changed to protect identities.

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