

FROM CRISIS TO EPIPHANY:  
WHAT FIRING A RESEARCH ASSISTANT HELPED ME APPRECIATE ABOUT  
AGENCY AND MUSLIM WOMEN IN HOWRAH, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

*In this article I reflect on how a moment of crisis – having to fire a research assistant – became an epiphany that triggered my interest in agency, which ultimately became the focus for my doctoral dissertation. The aims of this article are twofold: first, to contribute to literature illustrating how serendipity and unexpected difficulties can shape ethnographic practice (e.g. Andrews, 2005; Cottle, 2001; Konecki, 2005; Pieke, 2000); and second, to describe how I came to appreciate the ways in which agency is embedded within and informed by the historical, sociocultural, and religious structures that shape the lives of Muslim women living in areas of urban poverty in Howrah.*

INTRODUCTION

My recently completed doctoral dissertation (Gibson, 2011) is about exceptional women organising for social change in urban poor areas of Howrah and Kolkata (twin cities<sup>1</sup> in West Bengal, India) and Lae (Papua New Guinea). It describes their efforts to create meaningful lives for themselves and their families through grassroots-level development initiatives in the context of urban poverty. In it, I not only explore the relationship between hope, agency, and development in order to gain a richer appreciation of what sustains collective action in the face of adversity, but also provide an alternative reading of what constitutes success and failure in development. I can write this description with ease now, several years after embarking on my research journey. However I was far less confident about my topic when I began my studies back in 2005. I had a research proposal and a general idea about what I thought I might look at, but the concept of agency was not yet on my horizons. I initially planned to focus on empowerment, a popular buzz word in work on gender and development at the time, but after meeting my research participants – extraordinary

women actively involved with grassroots organisations – I quickly realised that they were already ‘empowered’ and that this concept would not be as fruitful as I had hoped. In this article I describe two key events concerning research assistants that occurred during fieldwork in Howrah that led me to focus on agency instead. My aim is to contribute to tales of fieldwork that illustrate how serendipity and unexpected difficulties can shape our ethnographic practice (e.g. Andrews, 2005; Cottle, 2001; Konecki, 2005; Pieke, 2000).

Research assistants can play an important role in how we engage with and come to know our research participants. They help us communicate and understand subtleties when we do not speak the language well; they can use their knowledge to suggest new lines of inquiry; and even direct our attention to certain topics or events we might otherwise overlook (Wolf, 1992). I tried twice, unsuccessfully, to work with research assistants in Howrah. The first assistant I hired made such an impression in a single visit that my participants asked me not to bring her back. My relationship with a second also ended badly when she quit suddenly, prompting my participants to suggest methods that circumvented the need for one at all. In what follows, I reflect on how these research crises became an epiphany that triggered my interest in agency. I build on work by Abu-Lughod (2002), Khan (1998), Korteweg (2008), Mahmood (2001) and Majid (1998) by focusing on the ways in which agency can be embedded within and informed by (and not just restricted by or posited against) historical, sociocultural, and religious structures and practices.

This article is divided into four sections. First I describe my moments of crisis, which involved Amina, one of my key research participants. Second, I discuss how these moments became an epiphany that led me to my theoretical framework. Third, I draw on Bourdieu’s theory of practice to think through some of the historical sociocultural structures that shape Amina’s life before describing her quest to create a more meaningful life for herself through education. Her story illustrates how agency is embedded in a variety of context-specific factors, and I discuss how her identity as a Muslim woman enables her to express agency in negotiating those factors. I conclude with some thoughts about how my moments of crisis/epiphany helped me to develop a fuller appreciation of agency among Muslim women organising for social change at the grassroots level in urban poor areas of Howrah.

#### MOMENTS OF CRISIS

I begin with a moment of crisis: a phone call from my PhD supervisor telling me I needed to fire my research assistant. I was only a week or two into

my first official fieldwork trip in 2005, so this threw me into a state of panic. My supervisor phoned me from New Zealand<sup>2</sup> and said, 'Lorena, something has happened. Amina rang me and she was very upset. You must fire your research assistant immediately.' After we finished our call I sat down to collect my thoughts. Amina, a young Muslim woman, is the coordinator of Howrah Pilot Project (HPP), a small, grassroots organisation<sup>3</sup> that runs several community development initiatives in Priya Manna (PM) Basti<sup>4</sup> – a slum area in Howrah characterised by poor quality housing and a degraded physical habitat. These initiatives include a *masala* (spice)-making enterprise, a women's saving scheme, access to family planning services and cataract surgery, and Talimi Haq School.<sup>5</sup> I felt that Amina and I were developing a good relationship and I was worried I had done something to disrupt that with my research assistant.

My main reason for working with a research assistant in Howrah was language. I had started to learn Bengali<sup>6</sup> prior to my fieldwork trips but was finding it difficult. Although Amina and Binod (a young Hindu man from a neighbouring *basti* and Amina's second-in-command at HPP) could hold a conversation with me in English, I worried that language and cultural barriers would prevent me from developing the depth of understanding I wanted. My experiences with local research assistants in Papua New Guinea had been successful and rewarding, so I was confident about working with one in Howrah.

I had several criteria for my research assistant: she had to be Muslim, fluent in English, Hindi and Urdu, and she had to be willing to travel to *bastis*. I sought to employ a Muslim woman because I assumed that my participants would be more comfortable talking with a woman of their own faith.<sup>7</sup> On the recommendation of a respected Muslim scholar, I hired a highly-educated Muslim woman I'll call Nawal who lived in a middle class area of Kolkata city with her husband and two children. Prior to visiting Howrah we met in central Kolkata and negotiated terms of employment; Nawal seemed pleasant and interested in my research. While she met my criteria, Nawal had almost nothing in common with the women in Howrah, as I quickly discovered a couple of days before my supervisor phoned me. Nawal had come to Howrah with me so I could introduce her to Amina and see how they got on. To my dismay, she disagreed with Amina on many issues, for example by telling her that she should not do family planning work because she was unmarried and implying that she was a bad Muslim for promoting tubal ligations.<sup>8</sup> She also became visibly upset at the matter-of-fact ways in which the women spoke of domestic violence and other hardships they face in the *basti*. On top of that, she did not do a very good job of translating, and twice asked for what I thought was an unreasonably large payrise on our trip back to Kolkata city.

The differences between Amina and Nawal in terms of education, social status, and behaviour alerted me to the extent of social stratification in Howrah and Kolkata, and to the diversity in Muslim women's lives. Upon reflection, I realised that there were many markers of class difference between Amina and Nawal. For example, Nawal's residence in a middle-class area of Kolkata city, her occupation (a teacher's aide at an international school), and her fluency in English are three factors that I think led Nawal to feel able and entitled to immediately challenge Amina about the family planning work she did in PM Basti. While she agreed that something needed to be done to address maternal morbidity and mortality (a serious problem within the *basti*), her main objection was that, because Amina was unmarried, she could not have any knowledge of sexual relations (premarital sex being *haram* or a forbidden act) and had no right to speak to married women about such matters. Amina politely told Nawal that she had completed training in the area of sexual and reproductive health. She also explained that although she was not married (and not practicing premarital sex), she considered it her responsibility as a Muslim and a good human being to help women *and* men from her community, as when women suffer ill-health as a result of having too many children or experience complications with childbirth, entire families are adversely affected. Nawal dismissed her responses and Amina later told me she did not press the issue further out of respect for Nawal's status, and also because experience has suggested to her that educated, middle-class women from Kolkata city believe they know better than a girl from a *basti* in Howrah.<sup>9</sup> Amina expressed her agency more subtly by using the social networks she has access to through HPP and contacting my supervisor. My initial assumption that being a Muslim woman was sufficient criteria for a research assistant was clearly flawed.

Obviously things had not gone well, hence the phone call from my supervisor. I phoned Amina to see how she was and whether I could visit the next day. She explained that she and Binod were uncomfortable with Nawal and asked me not to bring her back. I agreed, of course, and immediately phoned Nawal to tell her I no longer required her services. When I next visited Howrah, Amina explained that she and Binod worried that Nawal might have a negative impact upon HPP's operations (whether she meant to or not) and asked me if we could 'do our best' in English without an assistant. I felt an awful responsibility for causing the distress I did with Nawal, so for the remainder of that trip worked in English with Amina and Binod.

When I returned to New Zealand in January 2006 and started analysing my data, I realised there was still a significant amount of misunderstanding between Amina and me. I had my faith in research assistants restored after another

er productive and happy relationship in Lae later that year so decided to hire a different research assistant on my next trip to Howrah in early 2007. This time I asked two staff members from the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Calcutta<sup>10</sup> (CSSSC) if they could recommend a reliable student to work with. This time I prioritised shared location rather than faith in my criteria and through them I met Sara, a young, highly educated Hindu woman who lived in Howrah. We negotiated terms of employment and she accompanied me to HPP's office on a couple of occasions. Sara was enthusiastic about my research and I found she did a much better job of translating than Nawal, although she had some mannerisms of which Amina did not approve, such as smoking cigarettes in HPP's office, wearing Western-style clothing, and talking about eating beef.<sup>11</sup>

My second moment of crisis came two weeks into this fieldwork trip. Sara had asked to renegotiate our terms and be paid weekly instead of at the end of my research. I was happy to comply and said that I would pay her once she had completed the transcription work I gave her each week. Unfortunately Sara was greatly offended by my suggestion. She sent me a long email explaining why she needed the money, how she needed to be paid regardless of whether or not she completed work for me, and how insulted she was that I only wanted to pay her after I had seen what she had done. She also informed me that she would not continue to work for me and attached an invoice for payment. I was surprised and distressed to receive this email and immediately contacted the staff at the CSSSC who had recommended Sara to me. They reassured me that I had not done anything offensive and offered to mediate a final meeting between us. It never eventuated, although they did pass on Sara's final payment to her on my behalf.

Once again I found myself without a research assistant. Amina and Binod's joy and relief at this showed me just how much of an imposition it was for me to bring a stranger into their lives. Recognising that language was a problem for us, Amina came up with another solution: she would step into the role of research assistant. I agreed and we worked in English, Amina translated where she could, and we recorded some interviews in Hindi.<sup>12</sup> I later hired a student in New Zealand to translate and transcribe those recordings (I transcribed everything else). Amina's decision to take on the role of research assistant triggered my interest in agency and ultimately the shape of my doctoral dissertation. Since it was so pivotal to my research, I now move from my moments of crisis to focus on Amina's agency. First, however, I briefly reflect on these unsuccessful attempts to work with research assistants.

While I can only speculate, I think it is safe to assume that my status as a for-

eign researcher in West Bengal played a role in these encounters. Being a woman from a comparatively wealthy country put me in a particular frame of reference in postcolonial India. Foreigners are usually associated with wealth, and I noticed that just about everyone I met – including my participants – seemed to associate me with resources or access to resources (particularly money and connections, or economic and social capital in Bourdieu's terms). Indeed, I later discovered that Nawal had said to Amina that I was rich, that I would go away and write a book about them and never return, and that Amina should try to get as much money from me as she could while I was there. As Nawal's comments suggest, foreign researchers are frequently perceived in a negative light. Abbott (1998:218) has discussed the severe criticism levelled at foreign-based researchers in India which stems from the ways in which anthropology and sociology were sometimes (and perhaps still are) used as tools of colonial and neo-colonial processes, producing biased and distorted interpretations of Indian society. Such legacies have resulted in a strong critique of 'Western' theories and, as Abbott points out, this intellectual resentment often 'spills over in a personal resentment of the researcher who is perceived as having more advantages than the Indian researcher' (1998:219). Although my relationship with these two research assistants ended badly, my relationship with Amina and Binod did not suffer; if anything, it was strengthened by these experiences and the solution we developed in responses to these research crises.

#### EPIPHANIES: *BEING* AND AGENCY

By the time my second research assistant quit I had started to pay attention to Amina's eagerness to learn English. She liked to speak English whenever possible and made sure I knew to correct her if she got something wrong. She bought numerous books on English grammar, both for herself and to use in her role as a teacher at Talimi Haq School. She also enrolled in an English language class and had me check her homework and go over her lessons with her. As I came to know her life story, I realised that learning English was part of her bigger desire for education in general, and she went to great lengths in order to achieve that. Education was clearly part of her aspiration to create a more meaningful life for herself, or her quest for *being* in Bourdieu's terms.

As I understand it, Bourdieu's concept of *being*<sup>13</sup> refers to a meaningful human life – one's sense of identity, significance and purpose – and is something that we all struggle to accumulate throughout our lifetimes. Bourdieu's conceptual tools of *illusio* and capital are useful for understanding how people accumulate *being*. *Illusio* refers to our interest in the social world: 'a fundamental belief in the interest of the game and the value of the stakes which is inherent in

that membership' (Bourdieu, 2000:11). 'The game' is another term Bourdieu uses for 'fields,' which are 'the various spheres of life, art, science, religion, the economy, the law, politics and so on, [which] tend to form distinct microcosms endowed with their own rules, regularities, and forms of authority' (Wacquant, 2008: 268). *Illusio*, Bourdieu tells us, 'is that way of *being in* the world, of being occupied with the world, which means that an agent can be affected by something very distant, even absent, if it participates in the game in which he is engaged' (2000: 135, italics in original). People cultivate *being* through social investment, by 'being occupied, projected towards goals, and feeling oneself objectively, and therefore subjectively, endowed with a social mission,' says Bourdieu (2000: 240).

A primary way in which people invest in the social world is by pursuing and deploying different types of capital. There are three main species of capital: economic (financial and material assets), cultural (dispositions, know-how, information, scarce symbolic goods, cultural goods, skills and titles) and social (relationships, the sum of the resources accrued by virtue of membership in a network or group) (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119; Wacquant, 2008: 268; Hage, 2009). These different forms of capital become resources in a given social space or field, and one type of capital (say, cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications) can enhance or be transformed into another (economic capital in the form of earning power). We all labour to accumulate capital – it is what gives meaning to our lives – but it also has to be recognised by others as being valuable and worth striving for. This is the idea of symbolic capital, or the amount of social recognition we gain by accumulating different types of capital (Hage, 2009): 'Each person accumulates whatever gives them a buzz in life, but what they choose is determined by their circumstances – that's ultimately what capital is for Bourdieu,' Hage explains (in Zournazi, 2002: 153). Bourdieu's concept of capital is useful because it captures more than economic capital; it is an economic metaphor for *being*. The more capital we accumulate, the more *being* we acquire. However, *being* is not created and distributed equally: 'While some people inherit "a lot of being", others have to scrape at the bottom of the barrel to get even a bit of being,' writes Hage (2003: 16). For those like Amina whose circumstances are constrained by the structural disadvantages of poverty or gender, capital can be much harder to accumulate and they find fewer social opportunities available to them. Reflecting on Amina's determination to pursue education in spite (or perhaps because of?) the adversity she faces as a Muslim woman living below the poverty line in Howrah, soon led me to conceptualise it in terms of agency.

In general terms, agency refers to our intention to act and our capacity to take

action. Our intentions are culturally constructed and our capacity to act is also influenced by cultural, historical and social conditions. Agency – in the sense of strong intentionality – is different from the routine actions we take as part of our everyday practices in that it is directed towards what Ortner calls ‘projects’, which are people’s ‘culturally constituted intentions, desires, and goals’ (2006:135, 151). As Ortner explains, agency has two related spheres of meaning: it is about intention and desire, and it is also a form of power, ‘about acting within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force’ (2006:139). Ortner’s framework is useful for its emphasis on the ‘social embeddedness of agents’ and the relations of power that social agents must negotiate (2006:130, 131). This framework allows for a broader reading than understandings of agency that view it as resistance to structural factors. As scholars such as Khan (1998), Korteweg (2008), and Mahmood (2001) point out, viewing agency in terms of resistance does not capture the ways in which Muslim women act in their social worlds from the positions they occupy, including how they can utilise their piety in pursuit of their projects (which do not necessarily seek to challenge or resist relations of domination associated with religion). A theory of embedded agency facilitates ‘more nuanced representations of Muslim women as both agentic and religious subjects’ (Korteweg, 2008: 435).

Because agency cannot be seen in isolation from the historical sociocultural structures that shape our lives, in the next section I briefly discuss the cultural and historical conditions of possibility for Amina’s ‘project’ (or quest for *being* through education). I then describe how she pursues her project in the context of inequalities, power differentials, and relations of solidarity. I believe that Amina draws on her piety and identity as a Muslim woman to express agency and negotiate the structures she lives within.

#### THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF KOLKATA’S ‘OBSESSION’ WITH EDUCATION

Amina’s interest in pursuing education is characteristic of many who live in Howrah and Kolkata. Dutta (2003:195), for example, describes contemporary Kolkata as ‘obsessed’ with education and learning. Education and the ability to speak English have been important routes for economic advancement and social status in Bengal since colonial times. In this section I take a brief historical glance to describe how the British colonial government of the 19th century made state education an important societal route for the pursuit of capital and *being*. I also describe the present-day legacies of such processes for Muslims in Howrah.

Colonial powers often sought to ‘civilise’ and ‘enlighten’ the supposedly im-

moral and intellectually inferior native subjects through education. One of the main purposes of state education in India, therefore, was to produce reliable public servants from the local population (see Bose & Jalal, 1998: 84; Roy, 1994). Two events from 1835 illustrate these processes. The first was the English Education Act of 1835, which made English the medium of instruction in Indian education. It also saw the teaching of English taken out of local institutions (including the Mohammedan College in Calcutta) and confined to institutions devoted to studies conducted entirely in English (Viswanathan, 1989: 41). This affected *madrasahs* (Muslim learning institutions) as well as Hindu centres of learning, which had previously enjoyed the patronage and funding of British officials. When resources were redirected to institutions teaching exclusively in English, the quality of *madrasah* education deteriorated. Although the 1835 Act was not specifically designed with Muslims in mind, several of my research participants were quick to point to this event as a key reason for the low social status of Muslims in India today. ‘We had very high calibre *madrasahs* prior to British rule,’ one woman told me during a heated discussion of the topic at a workshop held at the Institute of Objective Studies in central Kolkata city in 2007:<sup>14</sup> ‘They had science, they had architecture, engineering. You don’t have that type of *madrasah* education now because the British systematically destroyed them.’

The second event occurred when Governor-General William Bentinck, who sponsored the English Education Act, also replaced Persian with English as the official language of the government and the higher courts in 1835 (Bose & Jalal, 1998: 84). This effectively made English the official language of British India and a prerequisite for employment in the colonial administration (Roy, 1994: 88). ‘The Calcutta Hindus seemed on the whole more eager for English than the Muslims and, some Englishmen believed, were also much easier to instruct,’ writes Viswanathan of the quick response of the Hindu literate castes to the societal opportunities afforded by state education: ‘A less flattering explanation was that they were fonder of gain and other lucrative employments that required knowledge of English’ (Viswanathan, 1989: 43–44). According to Moorhouse, ‘The first effective thing the educational apparatus of nineteenth century Calcutta did for the Hindu Bengalis (from whom the *bhadralok*<sup>15</sup> exclusively came) was to draw them far ahead of the Bengali Muslims in power and influence’ (1971: 193). This was because the majority of Muslims remained aloof from British state education, as Bose and Jalal (1998: 85) point out: ‘Smarting from the loss of sovereignty and state power Muslims, especially in urban areas, resented the imposition of English and responded with much greater enthusiasm to reformist movements seeking an internal regeneration of Islam.’<sup>16</sup>

These are just two events among many, but they serve to show how the British educational apparatus of the 19th century was very effective in establishing new forms of power in Bengal. Not only did such processes augment growing divisions between Bengal's Muslims and Hindus,<sup>17</sup> they also created new forms of distinction based on education. Cultural capital in the form of an English education, and knowledge of the English language, facilitated access to administrative positions in the colonial government in Calcutta (the capital of British India until 1911), a principal means of economic and political influence. Such opportunities enabled a small class of Hindu elites to gain economic power in Calcutta. Viswanathan describes how state education created 'different tests of fitness' which brought 'a new breed of professional men to the fore' and contributed to occupational patterns along lines of religion and caste (1989:192–193). Writing about Calcutta in the early 1900s, McPherson notes that Bengalis had a somewhat disdainful attitude towards factory employment: 'In general they displayed a voracious appetite for education and a matching penchant for non-manual forms of employment. Such attitudes helped create a social milieu in which menial and industrial occupations ranked low on the scale of social aspirations. The end result was a disproportionate influx of Bengalis into clerical and professional occupations...' (1974: 3). According to McPherson, by the 1920s education and employment had become major sources of contention for Muslims and Muslims perceived themselves 'as the "have nots" of Bengali society' (1974:13).

These themes continue in the present, with significant differences in education and employment patterns between Hindus and Muslims. In contemporary Indian society, Muslims occupy a lower social status in relation to other communities, as evidenced in a high profile report assessing the social, economic and education status of India's Muslims which was released during my 2006 fieldwork trip. The Sachar Report<sup>18</sup> (Government of India, 2006) reiterates what other researchers have already documented about the marginalised status of Indian Muslims,<sup>19</sup> finding that overall Muslims are worse off than other socio-religious communities in terms of poverty and access to physical infrastructure, literacy levels and female schooling,<sup>20</sup> and formal and public sector employment.<sup>21</sup>

The structural disadvantages of urban poverty are key issues for Muslims, India's largest minority community.<sup>22</sup> Thirty-one percent of India's Muslims live below the poverty line and on average poor Muslims only consume 75% of the poverty line expenditure (Government of India, 2006:157, 158). In urban areas, Muslims have the highest incidence of poverty – (38.4%) – of all socio-religious communities (Government of India, 2006:157). Several studies of

Muslims in Kolkata (where they comprise 20.27% of the city's population) and Howrah (where they make up 24.44% of the city's population, Census of India 2001) have shown that they live predominantly in *bastis* (see Samanta, 2004; Ramaswamy & Chakravarti, 1997; Siddiqui, 1974/2005). PM Basti does not have, and has never had, adequate access to basic civic amenities such as sanitation or water facilities, which is reflected in spatial concentrations of high rates of disease, infant and maternal mortality, stunted growth, malnutrition, illiteracy, and other human development indicators as *basti* residents embody historical sociocultural structures.

Although religion is not the only factor influencing the social status of India's Muslims, the fact remains that there are disparities in access to economic, cultural, and social capital between socio-religious groups, and Muslim women living in poverty are at a consistent disadvantage (see Basu, 2008; Government of India, 2006; Hasan & Menon, 2004; Samanta, 2004). Hasan and Menon sketch the 'stark reality' of a Muslim woman's life, compiled from their all-India Muslim Women's Survey:

She is typically among the poorest, whether she lives in urban or rural India, and is illiterate for the most part; if educated, she seldom progresses beyond primary school; she is married by the age of 15 years, usually has three children by the time she is 20 years old, and is plagued by ill-health for most of her life. Low skills and education, as well as seclusion and a severe lack of mobility, limit her chances of paid work outside the home, making for almost complete economic dependence on her husband – who is likely to be poor and disadvantaged himself. Violence, or the threat of violence within the home – where she spends the greater part of her life – and the lack of any viable options to it keep her in a highly subordinated and often abusive relationship, while cultural and social norms, suffused with a pervasive patriarchy, allow her little choice or decisional autonomy in practically every aspect of her life. (Hasan & Menon, 2004: 241)

This is the wider context in which Amina pursues her quest for education. Before I turn to her story, I first reflect on the potential implications of my decision to focus on her quest for *being* within PM Basti. Bourgois highlights the risks involved in representing people living in poverty by quoting a warning issued by Laura Nader in the early 1970s: 'Don't study the poor and powerless because everything you say about them will be used against them' (Bourgois, 1996:18). I want to make it clear that I do not intend to present Amina as a heroine. Amina's achievements are extraordinary given the context in which

she lives, but they are the result of the support of a range of social actors, as I explain. Like Bourgois (1996:18), I also worry about any political implications arising from Amina's comments and my observations and have not included anything I thought might bring her harm. I take full responsibility for converting her words, actions, and in some cases 'possibly fleeting opinions' (Wolf, 1992:11) into a text, and like Abu-Lughod I am aware that 'I have made the words of those I quote speak to issues they could not anticipate' (1993:32).

#### AMINA'S QUEST FOR *BEING*

Amina lives with her family just a few doors away from HPP's office in PM Basti, which is located along Grand Trunk Road in Shibpur, Howrah. PM Basti originally grew as a settlement for jute mill workers in the early 1900s, when Howrah underwent a period of rapid industrial growth. Its original residents were primarily Urdu-speaking Muslims, mostly landless, poor, illiterate young male farm workers who had been recruited from rural villages to labour in the jute mills (see Ramaswamy, 2006 and Khatoon, 2009a). Today it spreads over 12.5 acres of land leased from Howrah Jute Mills. With around 50,000 inhabitants – mainly Urdu-speaking Muslim families, some of which have been there for three generations or more – it is one of Howrah's most densely populated areas (Ramaswamy, Gibson and Venkateswar, 2010: 293). According to Amina, most of the population is uneducated and those not working in the jute mills find employment in various forms of light industry and manufacturing as well as 'owners of small shops, fruit and vegetable-sellers, rickshaw-drivers or workers in shops in Kolkata's Barrabazaar' (Khatoon, 2009b: 1).

Amina's house, a clean and tidy single room, is typical of those found in PM Basti. It has one entrance facing a narrow lane crowded with dozens of similar dwellings. Amina's mother runs a small stall outside their house selling goods such as *bidi* (hand-rolled cigarettes), *paan* (spices and other fillings wrapped in betel leaves), and *kachori* (fried spicy snacks). Their room is small – it could fit a bicycle lengthwise inside – with a small alcove near the entrance for cooking utensils. It has an electricity line rented (illegally) from a 'lender' but no bathroom, kitchen, or running water. Cooking is done over a coal fire in the alcove or outside on boards laid across the open drain. The room contains a bed, where Amina's older brother (a fruit and vegetable vendor) and his wife sleep, and sleeping mats for their two young children and Amina's mother to roll out on the concrete floor at night. The bright paint on the concrete walls doesn't always withstand the humidity and has cracked and fallen away in places. Pictures, plates and other possessions decorate the room. On the wall next to the bed a series of narrow iron rungs leads to a trap door in the low

ceiling. This is Amina's room, 'upstairs' in a small gap between the ceiling and the roof. Amina has her own tiny television and is proud of the fact that she takes care of her electricity bills and other expenses herself. Her room leaks during monsoon season and she has to be careful about how she stores her clothes so that rats do not nest in the boxes.

Amina has a ration card with the letters 'BPL' stamped across it in red, indicating that her household is one of those in the poorest category, Below the Poverty Line. This stamp allows her to buy basic items such as kerosene and rice at discounted prices from a ration shop. Ramaswamy (co-founder of HPP) summarises life for the poorest households in this *basti*, which 'revolves around daily survival in the margins of society':

It is estimated that about 10 percent of the slum households are in the poorest category. Few in this category avail themselves of primary education and children begin working from as early as the age of five, either in the home or outside. Girls are married by the time they are sixteen, and they raise their own children in the same manner. Illiteracy is almost universal in this poorest class. Attitudes among the uneducated regarding female education and women's activities outside the home are conservative. Typically, the bread-winning male earns his daily wage of between one hundred rupees<sup>23</sup> and one hundred and fifty rupees, performing manual labor, petty vending, rickshawpulling, and the like. Family sizes are large, with at least five children being the norm and in some cases more than ten. Shelter consists of a single (rented) room of about 100 square feet. ... Lacking any vocational skills the livelihood options for youth, and especially girls, are extremely limited. (Ramaswamy et al., 2010:293)<sup>24</sup>

Amina is passionate about addressing the social issues that arise from structural disadvantages in PM Basti, including the extreme and pervasive violence against women; child labour; the pornography ring and human trafficking racket that targeted young girls in the mid-2000s; corruption (by landlords, police, and politicians) and illegal housing construction; the poor quality of education available at local government schools (the cost of which is beyond the reach of many families); sanitation problems caused by insufficient toilet facilities and open drains; sexual and reproductive health problems she says are experienced by around 90% of women in the *basti*; and other health problems such as diarrhoea, tuberculosis, and inadequate and expensive local medical facilities. This passion underlies her commitment to HPP and she has also written about such issues in her six-part series of articles on urban

poverty in PM Basti, entitled *See the City from Here* (Khatoon, 2009a).<sup>25</sup> In our conversations Amina was quick to point out what she saw as the roots of many of the problems in PM Basti: illiteracy, lack of knowledge, and unemployment.

Amina gained her love of learning from her father, who believed that girls had as much right to education as boys. Their economic situation meant that while Amina and her brothers all started primary school, they did not all finish it. They had to make a choice, and Amina said her brothers decided she should be educated as she was the youngest. Amina's experiences are not uncommon: recent research on attitudes towards girls' schooling among *basti*-dwellers in Howrah and Kolkata suggests that most Muslim parents are interested in educating their children regardless of gender (see Tewari, 2001; Husain, 2005). For example, a household survey of PM Basti conducted in 2005 found that more boys (17%) than girls (13%) between the ages of 5 and 19 had never attended school, and that of those who did attend school, girls were more likely to continue with schooling (57%) than boys (51%) until adolescence (Khatoon, 2009c: 5). In a survey of Muslim *basti*-dwellers from the Park Circus-Topsia area of Kolkata city, Husain's respondents argued that education was more important for the girl child because it enhanced her marriage prospects and enabled her to be independent after marriage, providing some security in the event her husband deserted her (2005: 139, 140, 141).

Amina began in a government school in PM Basti but faced a problem when she came to Class 8 (the last year of primary schooling). She told me the school only admitted girls up until Class 8, whereas boys could study until Class 10. She would have to go to school in another neighbourhood to continue her education. 'But how could my parents allow this?' she asked, referring to the fact that they didn't want her moving outside Muslim areas. Conservative attitudes regarding female mobility affect the education of adolescent Muslim girls; once girls reach puberty, they are often withdrawn from school and kept close to home in order to maintain their chastity and, with it, family honour.<sup>26</sup> In PM Basti, although pre-adolescent girls are more likely to attend primary and middle school than boys of the same age, the aforementioned 2005 household survey found that enrolment ratios for girls and boys plummeted sharply (from over 70% to less than 20%) at high school level (Classes 9–13), and twice as many girls dropped out of high school than boys (Khatoon, 2009c: 5). Amina was stubborn, however, and kept at her parents until they consented and let her go to a school in a nearby neighbourhood. She was unusual in this respect, saying that 'Nobody here used to send their children to school, nobody used to teach them. So it used to be very difficult.'

Amina's father passed away on the day of her final Class 10 exam. 'It was a maths exam,' she said, speaking quietly as she recalled what was clearly a difficult time. She loved her father but she also loved her studies and felt it was important to sit the exam that would mark the end of 10 years of hard work. 'What was I supposed to do? I was thrown into darkness.' She made the difficult decision to leave her dead father's side to go and sit her exam. When she returned she said she had to face 'all kinds of talk' from her relatives and neighbours.

With her father gone, Amina found it hard to continue her education. There was no money for fees. 'Besides,' said Amina, 'no one in the family liked the idea of me, a girl, getting a college education. So preparations for my marriage began.' Her father's death was especially difficult for Amina and her mother. 'We are poor people,' she sighed during a rare moment of sadness. 'Life is very difficult. We cried a lot then, me and my mother, because we had no money and we missed my father. We were hungry and often went without food. I couldn't continue my schooling because who would pay the fees?'

Amina found work for herself as a private tutor for students attending formal schools within the *basti* in order to earn some money and thinks her attitude brought her to the attention of Ramaswamy, a grassroots organiser, social planner, educator, writer, and co-founder of HPP. Ramaswamy invited her to interview for a position at HPP. 'Sir<sup>27</sup> asked me a lot of questions, like 'what do you do, what year of study are you in, what are your future plans?'" Amina recalled. 'I told him that I wanted to learn about computers and continue my education, but I had to leave after my father died.' Ramaswamy asked her to become a teacher at Talimi Haq School, HPP's central activity. She said, 'He told me to go home and talk to my mother about it. Sir said he couldn't pay me but he could give me computer training. That was my dream!' Amina's mother was happy but permission had to come from Amina's brother. Fortunately, he saw this as an opportunity: 'My brother said "Okay you can join, because I have no money. If you work there you can complete your training."'

Her brother was not always as supportive, though, especially when she planned to attend teacher training courses across the river in Kolkata city. Once again she found herself negotiating conservative attitudes towards women's movements outside the *basti* (which Amina thinks are the result of illiteracy, patriarchal power and lack of knowledge rather than anything in the *Quran*, which many of those in PM Basti's poorest households are unable to read). 'My brother was very angry with me,' Amina told me. 'He said, "You're going to Kolkata to meet boys, you have a bad character". Sarwari [another teacher] had the same

problem. Her brother said, “why are you teaching at a school for bad girls? Why are you going to Kolkata? There are boys there. Are you talking to boys? You’re bad!”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, with Ramaswamy’s encouragement, Amina not only completed training for her work at HPP but she also enrolled in college, took morning classes while working at HPP, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Calcutta University in 2006. She is considering pursuing a Masters degree, or perhaps even a PhD, in the future.

It took years for Amina to win her family’s confidence and trust and she is proud of the fact that they now support her: ‘Now I have even been outside of Kolkata, to Mumbai, Bangalore, Ahmenabad, and I go alone,’ she said, ‘I just inform my family that I have to go to this place on this day and nobody asks me any questions as to why, how, or when because now they trust me and they know that their girl won’t do anything wrong. Previously I used to get beatings just for going to my neighbour’s place, but there is nothing like that now.’ She credits much of this to the support and guidance she has received from Ramaswamy: ‘I have had a lot of support from Sir. If he hadn’t changed my mind about continuing my education then maybe today I would have been married<sup>29</sup> to someone and would have had lots of kids and that would have been the end of my life.’

Not doing ‘anything wrong’ for Amina means embodying her devotion to Islam and being ‘good and true’ in her clothing and demeanour. She describes her work for HPP as ‘an Islamic choice:’ ‘Islam teaches one to utilise the gifts given so compassionately by God to serve God’s creatures,’ she wrote in an essay about her faith entitled *Beyond Four Walls*, ‘I like this. My work gives me the opportunity to practice this, to discern and realise what I have received, and to serve others with these gifts’ (personal communication). Amina is proud of the fact that people who once tried to dissuade her (including relatives and local political party activists) now bring their daughters to Talimi Haq School with the directive, ‘keep her with you.’ Working at HPP has transformed Amina’s life, as she noted in the aforementioned essay:

My life too could well have been like that of all the other girls who are born, grow up, get married, go away, produce children, stay at home, and die. I consider myself different from them today. I did not compromise my dignity. By staying within the limits of what is good, and living within the same society, I tried to change myself. In doing this I faced many difficulties and challenges. But I never admitted defeat before anyone. (Amina, personal communication)

Today Amina is a confident and assertive Muslim woman in her late 20's who can not only request that researchers like me take care with who they employ as research assistants, but can also organise fieldtrips, attend training courses, and speak at conferences without anyone from PM Basti questioning her morals or character. In July 2008 she travelled to Italy on a Talimi Haq School fieldtrip with Binod, Ramaswamy, and some teenage students (boys *and* girls), and in 2009 she went to Bangkok alone to speak at an environmental conference. Through HPP she has formed lasting friendships – what Ortner might term relations of solidarity – with not only Ramaswamy and the other HPP volunteers but also foreigners (myself included) who visit the organisation. She has become a role model within PM Basti, showing that a young Muslim woman can gain a university degree and travel outside the *basti* while upholding faith and family honour. I view this as an expression of agency and suggest she achieved it by embracing her identity as a Muslim woman.

Muslim women are increasingly asserting their agency through their piety, as Chowdhury, Farsakh, and Srikanth (2008: 450) point out, viewing Islam as a positive force with which to deal with structural and patriarchal constraints (see also Mahmood, 2001). For example, in her research among Muslim women in *bastis* in southwest Kolkata city, Samanta (2005) found that her participants negotiated similar sociocultural and structural constraints in pursuing education and, like Amina, found a way to work within those boundaries by embracing some of the attributes of a devout Muslim woman (such as modest clothing and behaviour). In a similar vein, Ahmed (2008) argues that Muslim women in Bangladesh use the notion of *boodhi* (intelligence or wisdom) as a tool to gain agency in a patriarchal society, basing their interpretation of *boodhi* on the Islamic tradition of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning or intellectual effort).<sup>30</sup> I believe that Amina capitalises on the symbolic power associated with religious faith (as Bourdieu might describe it) by drawing on her piety and understanding of Islam as a basis for expressing agency. In doing so, she has found a socially acceptable path within, rather than seeking to transgress, normative gender expectations, although she tests them by pursuing higher education and choosing not to get married. For Bourdieu, 'The social world is, to a large extent, what the agents make of it, at each moment; but they have no chance of un-making and re-making it except on the basis of realistic knowledge of what it is and what they can do from the position they occupy within it' (1985: 734). I believe Amina's expressions of agency demonstrate a 'realistic knowledge' of the social world. She does not challenge Islam; this would require a great deal of courage, critical reflection, and distancing. Amina is a devout Muslim, as I have noted, and while she has thought about her faith she does not reject it (on the contrary, she embraces it). To me, this illustrates

Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency not only as resistance or 'the capacity for progressive change, but also, importantly, as the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist' (2001: 217). Drawing on Mahmood, Zigon terms this as 'living sanely' in the world, 'to be an active agent in the attempt to live acceptably both for oneself and others, and to do so within the world in which one finds herself' (2009: 259). It is not easy for someone like Amina to create and maintain a critical distance from religion and the community within which she is so immersed. Her rationalisation enables her to work in the community while being critical of various aspects of it.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I began with a research crisis when I had to fire a research assistant. Amina's decision to step into this role became an epiphany for me as it triggered my interest in agency. Urban poor Muslim women face a number of historical, sociocultural, and structural disadvantages, as I have discussed, and a theory of embedded agency allows us to understand how Amina's actions in pursuit of education are informed by and embedded within the various historical sociocultural structures (including religion) that shape her life. According to Ortner, 'People in positions of power "have" – legitimately or not – what might be thought of as "a lot of agency," but the dominated too always have certain capacities, and sometimes very significant capacities, to exercise some sort of influence over the ways in which events unfold' (2006: 144). In this article I have drawn attention to the wider relations of power, inequality and solidarity within which Amina is embedded. I have also highlighted the support she had from her father, from Ramaswamy, and (to a lesser extent) her brother, showing how relations of solidarity with male authority figures were an important constructive factor in informing Amina's agency. Being attentive to Amina's quest for *being* through education enabled me to see how she has found a socially acceptable way to express agency as a faithful Muslim woman embedded within historical, sociocultural, and structural constraints.

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NOTES

- 1 Howrah and Kolkata cities are separated by the Hoogly (or Hugli) river. Howrah city's population is around 1 million and Kolkata city's population is around 5 million. Both cities are encompassed within the Kolkata Metropolitan Area and this larger area is often what people refer to when they use the term 'Kolkata'. The KMA is the tenth biggest metropolis in the world in terms of population size – over 13.5 million according to the 2001 Census of India – and has the highest population density in India (Kolkata Urban Services for the Poor, 2004: 6).
- 2 It seems pertinent here to mention that my supervisor, Sita Venkateswar, is highly educated, grew up in a middle-class Hindu family in Kolkata and speaks fluent Bengali and Hindi (as well as several other languages). Amina had called her to explain in Hindi what had happened, asking my supervisor to communicate her concerns to me as her command of English was not then adequate for the task. Also, I have not disguised the locations of the organisations I worked with and, with permission, have used the real names of the people and groups involved in this study. Some participants took up my offer of anonymity (an offer I always make as part of my ethical responsibility to protect my participants) and chose pseudonyms but most were happy for me to use their real names. I make no distinction between real names and pseudonyms in the text.
- 3 I should point out that HPP's co-founder, V. Ramaswamy, makes a distinction between HPP – which he describes as a grassroots organisation or an experiment in grassroots civic action – and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). He does not consider HPP to be an NGO.
- 4 *Basti*, which means settlement in Bengali and Hindi, is a word currently used to refer to areas of low quality housing and urban degradation (slums).
- 5 'Talimi Haq' means 'right to education' in Urdu.
- 6 I decided to learn Bengali because it is one of West Bengal's official languages. While Amina, as a Bengali Muslim, does speak Bengali, in hindsight it would have been more beneficial to learn Urdu as the majority of my research participants spoke this or Hindi rather than Bengali.
- 7 It is common for foreign anthropologists to employ local research assistants; indeed it was one of the conditions of my research visa in Papua New Guinea. Wolf (1992) and Beasley (2006) reflect on the relationships between themselves, their local assistants, and their participants and how this affected their research

in Taiwan and Papua New Guinea respectively. Ryan, Kofman and Aaron (2011) provide an interesting account of their experiences as non-Muslim researchers working with Muslim peer researchers in North London.

- 8 Some religious leaders believe that tubal ligations and vasectomies do permanent harm and are therefore unacceptable to Islam.
- 9 I later wondered whether this was perhaps an expression of the Islamic virtue of *al-hayā'* (modesty or shyness). As Mahmood (2001: 212–213) discusses, *al-hayā'* is considered an important religious virtue for pious Muslim women to acquire.
- 10 Kolkata was formerly known as Calcutta. Calcutta was the anglicised version of the name of the fishing village around which the city grew during the period of British colonial rule. In 2001 the West Bengal Government changed the city's official name to Kolkata to better reflect Bengali pronunciation. I use Kolkata to conform with the official designation and Calcutta to refer to the city before its name change. Where I quote other sources I retain the original spelling.
- 11 While Muslims do eat beef, Hindus generally do not. As a devout Muslim Amina was displeased with what she perceived as Sara's lack of commitment to her faith.
- 12 Binod also acted as a research assistant by taking photographs and recording conversations with my equipment as I worked, organising interviews, and helping with translation when Amina was busy. His input was different but just as valuable as Amina's.
- 13 The concept of 'being-in-the-world' did not, of course, originate with Bourdieu. Like many French philosophers, Bourdieu was influenced by Heidegger's philosophy of Being and has synthesised and critiqued Heidegger's ideas in his own work (see Bourdieu, 1991, 2000; Peters, 2012; Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002).
- 14 The Institute of Objective Studies is an NGO that promotes social science research on issues facing Indians in general and Muslims in particular. Dr M.K.A. Siddiqui, who co-ordinates the IOS Kolkata Chapter, hosted a workshop on the educational and economic status of Muslim women in Kolkata at which I was guest speaker.
- 15 *Bhadralok* (respectable folk) is a Bengali term used to designate 'the social elite that emerged out of the economic transformations – the ruins as well as the opportunities – wrought by East India Company land reform and trade policies' (Mani, 1998: 43). Contrary to Moorhouse's claim, *bhadralok* were not exclusively

Hindu; a small group of Muslims belonged to this class (see Amin, 1996:5–8).

- 16 I make this point in order to emphasise that colonial processes contributed to, but were not solely responsible for, Indian religio-political identities. Indian social tradition as we know it today was not a nineteenth-century British colonial invention, as Bose & Jalal (1998) and van der Veer (1996) make clear, and attributing too much power to colonial rule leaves little room for local agency. However the role played by various local actors (Muslims and Hindus) in contributing to the unequal distribution of power is not always clear, and an important area of future research might investigate the roots of this unequal development.
- 17 India was governed by Mughal rulers prior to British colonial rule. Although scholars such as Bose and Jalal point out that Mughal rule did not lead to the disappearance of Hindu traditions (1998:28), British colonisers understood things differently. See Appadurai (1993), Bose & Jalal (1998), Dalrymple (2006), Hasan (1996, 1997), and Metcalf (2005) for discussions of the ways in which British colonial practices constructed an essentialised vision of Hindus and Muslims which, when combined with local agency, laid the groundwork for religious difference to be a central feature of social and political life and contemporary Muslim-Hindu relations.
- 18 Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh commissioned this report in 2005. It is popularly known as the Sachar Report after Justice Rajindar Sachar, the chairperson of the committee that prepared the report.
- 19 For example, Hasan (1997), Hasan & Menon (2004). Steven Wilkinson makes a similar point in his comments on the analysis in the Sachar Report, which he describes as 'detailed, though not very new' (2007:832).
- 20 For example in West Bengal, where Muslims constitute 25.2% of the population, the literacy levels in urban areas are 84% for Hindus (89% for males and 78% for females) and 66% for Muslims (72% for males and 59% for females) (Government of India, 2006:288).
- 21 This is particularly the case for Muslim women. While approximately 44% of Indian women aged between 15–64 participate in the workforce (compared with 85% of men), on average Muslim women have the lowest workforce participation rate of 25% overall, with just 18% in urban areas, mostly concentrated in home-based activities (Government of India, 2006:90, 96).
- 22 Muslims constitute 13.4% of India's population, although West Bengal has on

average a higher percentage of Muslim residents (Census of India 2001). Articles 29 and 30 of the Constitution of India protect the interests and rights of minorities, although the term ‘minority’ is not formally defined (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2001a).

- 23 In 2012, one New Zealand dollar = approximately 44 Indian rupees.
- 24 This is an article I co-authored with Ramaswamy, and Sita Venkateswar, my PhD supervisor.
- 25 In 2008 Amina was awarded an Infochange Media Fellowship to research and write a series of articles providing a first-hand account of urban poverty in Priya Manna Basti.
- 26 See Chakraborty (2010) for a discussion of the constraints on the mobility of young Muslim women in Kolkata’s *bastis*, and how they negotiate them.
- 27 Amina calls Ramaswamy ‘Sir’ as a sign of respect. Their relationship is unconventional and transgresses a variety of structural factors (including class, gender, and religion). Amina told me that she views Ramaswamy as her teacher, mentor, and respected elder, and both she and her mother commented that they will never forget the time and energy he has invested in guiding her. Over the years their relationship has evolved as Amina has matured into a strong, confident, and very competent young woman. They are now closer to peers than teacher and student, although Amina will always call him ‘Sir’.
- 28 Chakraborty (2009, 2010) discusses what it means to be a ‘good Muslim girl’ in conservative Muslim *bastis* in Kolkata city.
- 29 Amina is unusual in that she is not yet married – another entrenched social norm in Howrah and Kolkata (see Chakraborty, 2009; Samanta, 2005) – and she often spoke of wanting to find a husband who is similarly ‘good and true’. While she aspires to marriage, she worries that it would curtail her freedom. ‘Here when a woman gets married her life is over,’ she said as we chatted about our families one day. ‘She has to stay at home, do whatever her husband says, and give him a child every year. I wouldn’t be able to work at HPP.’
- 30 Scholars such as Majid (1998) and activists like Irshad Manji (2005) have also called for a recovery of *ijtihad* to critically reassess Islamic traditions and renegotiate equitable gender relations between Muslim men and women.

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