

London School of Economics and Political Science

Weaving Lives from Violence:  
Possibility and Change for Muslim Women in Rural West Bengal

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## DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is about the changing lives of Muslim women living in a not so out of the way place. Though on the geographic margins of India, at the fringes of the state of West Bengal, the Hindu goddess-named village they call home has become increasingly connected. In recent years their verdant, jungle isolation has been stripped away by fresh tarmac, mobile phone signal and the formerly shadowy yet increasingly assertive presence of a global Islamic reformist movement.

The lives of a diverse group of women in this village of Tarakhali are drawn together to ask what it is to be a Muslim woman here, at this time. Female personhood is understood as something constructed through the skilful navigation of myriad forms of everyday violence. This deft handling of tension and contradiction gains strength and significance as women experience this moment of incorporation and the accompanying transformations. The fundamental role of Islam in shaping their understandings is explored through charged encounters with the conservative Tablighi Jama'at and the increasingly unpredictable and violent interactions with the supernatural.

As conceptual and actual spaces are opening up for women, how they enter the labour market and engage (un)productively with microfinance is explored, as is how they transcend village, gender and social boundaries to become “seen” by local bureaucracies. Finally, the impact of this moment of discord in which some beliefs and experiences clash with others is drawn into focus, as this is how it shapes the way in which these women envisage a future both here on earth, and in the hereafter.

*For the women of Tarakhali*

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## GLOSSARY

*adda* – conversation / chat

*amader* - our

*azaan* – the call to prayer

*bazaar* – market place

*bhari* – low / heavy

*begun* – aubergine

*bhai* - brother

*bhalo* – good

*bonti* – a cutting blade

*boro masjid* – big mosque

*burka* – a fully covering female garment

*cha* - tea

*chal* – uncooked rice

*chador* – large piece of cloth typically worn by Muslim women

*daal* – lentils

*dadar* – a type of embroidery work

*didì* – sister

*gach* - tree

*gunnin* – an Islamic healer

*halka* – light

*hadith* – sayings or actions attributed to the Prophet

*hijab* – an Islamic head covering

*holud* - turmeric

*imam* – prayer leader of a mosque

*jahannam* - hell

*jannah* – heaven

*jharu* – broom

*jinn* – supernatural being

*jol* - water

*jonghi* – terrorist

*jonmostan* – birth place

*kacca* – earth-built (houses)

*kada* – wet mud

*kaj* – work

*kharap* - bad

*kosto* – suffering / hardship  
*kumro* – pumpkin  
*kurta pyjamas* – a long tunic and loose trousers  
*lota* – water vessel  
*lungi* – a type of sarong worn around the waist by men  
*madrassa* – educational institute  
*maulana* – Islamic religious scholar  
*meye* – girl  
*muri* – puffed rice  
*namaz* – prayer  
*nani* - grandmother  
*niqab* – female face covering  
*noshto* – rotten or fallen  
*oshanti* - disturbance  
*paan* – a betel leaf, betel nut and tobacco preparation  
*pap* - sin  
*pir* – a sufi master or spiritual guide  
*pukka* – man-made (houses) or ripe  
*pukur* - pond  
*purdah* – seclusion, the practice of screening women from men or strangers  
*qazi* – arbitrator of Muslim Personal Law in the village  
*Quran* – the central Islamic religious book  
*roti* – bread  
*sheitan* – satan  
*shirk* – the sin of practising idolatry or polytheism within Islam  
*shorkar* – government  
*tabiz* – a protection amulet  
*talaq* – divorce  
*tel* – oil  
*tenshun* - tension

## NOTE ON STYLE

In what follows, I have represented Bengali words as transcriptions as opposed to transliterations. This is in order to capture as closely as possible the nature of vernacular speech. Within Bengali there is no use of capital letters, so I have similarly refrained from using them in my representations.

All of my interlocutor's names as well as that of the village have been altered in order to protect their anonymity.

All photographs are my own.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

Aksha – Statuesque and intimidating, Aksha runs the Loskor tea shop alongside the main road.  
Mother of Reenu and Rojida, sister-in-law to Tabina and daughter-in-law to Maryam.

Alima – The daughter of *nani* Ashima who works as a domestic help in Delhi.

Aliya – Calm, intelligent and resourceful, Aliya manages life's difficulties with extraordinary skill and pragmatism. She is mother to Jaccaria and her husband is *nani* Ashima's son.

Farhaza – Shy and troubled, Farhaza had a love marriage which has led to a fractious relationship with her mother-in-law Khozana. She is mother of Shamsia, Sirana and Shafuz.

Jaccaria – Aliya's 18 year-old unmarried daughter.

Khozana (Kaki) – Forthright and funny, Khozana is a widow who has lived most of her life in Tarakhali, her beloved *jonmostan*. She is mother-in-law to Farhaza and Nusrat.

Malika – One of only two female sari brokers in the village who has transformed misfortune into social and economic freedom.

Maryam – Maryam is an elderly widow who is head of the Loskor family. She has a tempestuous relationship with her two daughters-in-law Aksha and Tabina.

Muniya – Aliya's daughter-in-law.

Nimra – Former *onchol pradhan*, Nimra is Sara's sister-in-law.

Nura – Nura loves to tell stories and talk about her faith. She is mother to three boys and her daughter Radhia, who she adores, and she is currently caught by a *jinn*.

Nusrat – Nusrat is a new arrival in the village, marrying Mubarak, Khozana's youngest son. She is too currently caught by a *jinn*.

Radhia – Nura's only daughter, she is 4 years-old. Spoilt, playful and a very fussy eater.

Reenu – Aksha's youngest daughter, Reenu spends a lot of time helping out in the tea shop. She is very good at athletics and dreams of one day becoming a police officer.

Rojida – Aksha's second youngest daughter, Rojida is troubled, aggressive and embroiled in rumours of past failed marriages and kidnapping.

Sara – Glamorous, sexy and a slightly incongruous presence, Sara is the only Christian convert in the village and one of the few to have a government job as a primary school teacher.

Shamsia – Farhaza's eldest daughter, Shamsia is naughty and a very good dancer.

Summaya – Plump and cheerful though widely disliked, Summaya is Sara's sister-in-law.

Tabina – Shrewd, irreverent and as feisty as her sister-in-law Aksha, Tabina is a skilled political and bureaucratic navigator who relishes her encounters with the local state.

## Part One: Women in Tarakhali

### Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis is about the lives of Muslim women living in a not so out of the way place. Though on the geographic margins of India, at the fringes of the state of West Bengal, the Hindu goddess-named village they call home has become increasingly connected. In recent years their verdant, jungle isolation has been stripped away by fresh tarmac, mobile phone signal and the formerly shadowy yet increasingly assertive presence of a global Islamic reformist group.

These are women often glimpsed in the background of middle-class Bengali lives, though seldom considered. They are those figures, chatting on a dusty roadside, with a child or a steel *lota* filled with water balanced against a thrust-out hip, the sunlight dancing across the metal. Perhaps they are bent low, their forms undulating from side to side as they chastise and polish the earth with a *jharu* made from the midribs of palms, or instead stand tall as their arms move vigorously up and down as they pump splashing water from deep under the ground. They may be laughing, wiping brows with the ends of their colourful saris or pulling them over their heads with the call of the *azaan*, or perhaps crouched alongside cooking fires, faces flickering behind the flames, the smoke and the shimmering heat.

As these glimpses suggest, like many women across India, those in the village of Tarakhali lead lives focused on domestic and kinship work, beneath which lies a daily navigation of emotion, tension and everyday violence. As members of India's largest and most resented religious minority (Banerjee 2010), living in a remote yet increasingly incorporated place in the Bengal borderland, theirs is a precarious citizenship (Bear & Mathur 2015). Relationships with the Indian state are constantly hard fought and consistently fraught, whilst belonging to the imagined Indian nation is something continually negotiated (Singh 2016).

Their lives are violent in other ways, through the deeply uncertain and destabilising effects of living on the flickering line of extreme poverty, where an unforeseen occurrence or event can entail a panicked slide into destitution (Krishna 2017). The landscape around them is itself shifting into one of increasing precariousness. The harshness of escalating environmental instability in the region is felt keenly in these parts (Jalais 2010), whilst the *jinni*<sup>1</sup> with whom they previously amicably shared the fields and the forests have begun to catch them instead.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jinn* are a type of supernatural being with origins in Islam.

*Jinns* do not represent the only ambiguous or unsettling Islamic presence here. Over the past twenty years the Tablighi Jama'at, a reformist Islamic movement that originated in the subcontinent in 1926, has begun to make its presence felt. From the flush of funds used to transform the *boro masjid* into a large, incongruous building of cool marble and electric fans, the pale blue and white clad figures of the Tablighis who arrive in Tarakhali every Tuesday, and the fiery sermons delivered to the women's prayer meetings, the finances, figures and philosophy of this revisionist Islamic movement flow into the village with increasing velocity. For many of the women, this internal scrutiny and proposed reformation of Muslim belief and practice is causing concern, whereby the cherished lived forms of Islam (Marsden 2005) they know and value are increasingly claimed to no longer be appropriate, or indeed, Islamic at all.

The time-space in which these women live is thus one of rupture and profound uncertainty. Their livelihoods as well as the landscape around them are quickly becoming encompassed in wider movements and processes. Located on the upper edge of the Sundarbans, the vast mangrove forests that stretch across the Bay of Bengal into Bangladesh, the island of [REDACTED] on which the village of Tarakhali can be found is no longer, in fact, an unconnected island. The completion of a bridge in 2006 means that [REDACTED] is now linked to the Bengal mainland. Three years prior to this in 2003, mobile phone signal finally reached the area. For the past nine or so years, these women have enjoyed the luxury of electricity, albeit intermittently.

This moment of incorporation and the accompanying transformations have undoubtedly brought advantages and opportunities. The past twenty years have seen a dramatic reconfiguration of the labour landscape here, with now almost a third of women in the village engaged in some form of employment (Indian Census 2011). Microfinance institutions have become a ubiquitous presence in the lives of the majority, providing a level of financial access and monetary autonomy formerly unimaginable (Huang 2016; Kar 2017). There also exists an increased engagement by women with politics and local bureaucracy, with the latter, in particular, understood as offering not only tangible material benefits but the ephemeral chance to be seen as more than mothers, daughters, sisters and wives. There is a drive by these women to understand the political landscape and to gain access to the fruits of the state, in a place where there is scant opportunity.

Yet an increased connectivity and encompassment in the rhythms of the state, the nation and the 24 hours news cycle bring an awareness that is not always reconcilable with their highly localised understandings and existences. The women here now know that across India, Muslims are being lynched for eating beef, that women are being gang raped with iron bars and that police hunt *jonghi*, or terrorists, who commit atrocities in the name of their faith. Their pronouncements on communal tensions or safety are now couched in terms of the local on the one hand and the world beyond on the

other: “ekhane bhalo ache, ekhane manoush bhai-bhai thakche, ekhane nirapod. okhane....” [Here is good, here people stay like brothers, here is safe. There...]

What is it like to be a Muslim woman here, at this moment? In grappling with how best to theoretically frame my representation of these female lives in all of their complexity, I have returned time and again to a single authorial aim: to as fully as possible convey the intimacies and intricacies of their experiences, their thoughts, their beliefs, and their desires. In doing so, I follow other female scholars who have produced rich and unflinchingly ethnographic explorations of women’s lives in South Asia (Gardner 1991; Grima 1992; Raheja & Gold 1994; Jeffery 1979; Lamb 2000; Mies 1982; Patel 2010; Ring 2006) or of Muslim women’s lives elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 1986; 1993a; Liberatore 2013).

What follows reflects the call inherent in many of these accounts for the privileging of ethnographic thickness (Ortner 1995) over any imported, external, westernised theoretical concerns and constructs (Abu-Lughod 1993a). Further, the women whose lives animate these pages are conceived of as themselves being the focus, as opposed to testifying to some social or cultural phenomenon. When I write about my most favoured collaborator Aliya, I want her to be not an “informant, expert witness”, but rather “an object of study in...herself” (Levy & Hollan 1998: 336). As will become clear, the lives of these women are nonetheless inextricably bound up in wider processes and logics, their experiences always articulated in relation to their position on the fringes, Muslim, rural, poor and female (Tsing 1993).

A conception of my collaborators as themselves the focus of analysis and exploration also aligns my work with those committed to a personhood or narrative-centred ethnographic approach (Briggs 1970; Hollan 2008; Levy 1975). The ability of an assemblage of everyday experiences, stories and vignettes emblematic of such studies to capture life worlds of those encountered in fieldwork has recently been shown to be well suited to capturing the complexity of Muslim lives elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 1986; 1993a; Banerjee 2010; Beatty 2015; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996; Simon 2014). This is thus an ethnography about these women as people in themselves, or rather, a personhood, womanhood centred ethnography exploring the lives of Muslim women living in a village in rural West Bengal.

The adoption of this approach for my own work is not only generated by my personal editorial desires, but fundamentally reflects the actual nature of my interactions with my female interlocutors. As I quickly learned in the first blisteringly hot summer in which I began to visit the village, eliciting insights that were not couched in deeply personal terms was problematic for these women. This, it became clear, was due to two primary reasons:

- 1) These questions had not been asked of them before, and they thus felt extremely uncomfortable engaging in this kind of talk; and,
- 2) They had been told explicitly or shown implicitly that their opinion was not valued and consequently were reluctant to speak in general terms.

Asking women what they felt was what produced answers. Gingerly, they would offer their perspectives on my enquiries, as though embarrassed by these poor and shabby wares which were all they had to offer in the realm of conversation. In fact, these were riches, treasured offerings articulated in subaltern female voices that have so often remained silenced or ignored.

In what follows, I will provide closely textured accounts of the women living in Tarakhali. In doing so, I will consider the socialisation of women from girls into adults, and the varied dimensions of female personhood. I will provide a continually shifting and evolving characterisation of these marginal Muslim rural-dwelling women as shaped by so many things, including family, faith, neighbours, events, tragedies, histories and future expectations. Time and again, I will return to their extraordinary strength, determination and bravery, in the face of significant adversity. I will begin with the day that *nani* Ashima died.

-



[REDACTED]

Figure 1: Map of the village

## *A Death*

It was the day of Mubarak's wedding when *nani* Ashima died. The following morning, I had arrived late at the village, leaving the bike in the usual place under a tree in the dusty shade outside of Nura's homestead. As I walked down the mud path running behind her house, flanked either side by the green vegetable gardens that her neighbour Aliya attended to so carefully, I noticed the crowd that had gathered in the courtyard of the dead woman's house. There was a low murmur of hushed conversations and tears, punctured by occasional wails and wavering cries. As though sensing my presence, a couple of the mourners with their backs to me turned, stared, then beckoned me over.

The body lay in the centre of the dusty courtyard where in previous months we had sat. It had been set up on a raised platform, and a black shroud or *chador* had been draped over the top of it, festooned with glinting golden stars and the Islamic sliver of a crescent moon. Many women stood around the body, weeping and consoling one another in quietly whispered exchanges. Under the shade of the *rannaghor*<sup>2</sup> that stood apart from the main house, others were sitting, sobbing more freely and crying out "oh nani! nani!". Their sobs tumbled over words that I interpreted to be mantras or prayer songs associated with passing, though I was quickly informed that they were something else: the cried-out memories of the dead woman, as is customary for Muslim women both here in this part of India and elsewhere in South Asia (Grima 1992: 59-61).

"oh nani! tumi amake bhalobhastey! tumi skule pore amar shonge kheltey! oh nani!"

[Oh grandmother! You loved me! You would play with me after school! Oh grandmother!]

Amongst those seated was Aliya, her open face calm, though with tears streaked down her cheeks. She acknowledged me with her green-grey eyes, one arm wrapped comfortingly around her daughter Jaccaria who sobbed violently and lamented the woman who was up until yesterday her grandmother. Slowly Aliya rose, entwining her youngest daughter with another similarly bereft figure, and coming over to me. She accepted my condolences with composure, gesturing behind her to Jaccaria and saying only "she's very young", as if to explain the effect this loss had wrought on her. Nonetheless, there was a heaviness and weariness about Aliya, so different from the smiling and vibrant figure who had playfully smeared *holud* on Mubarak the night before his wedding two days ago, before enthusiastically ladling out portions of meat curry and rice to the wedding guests in order to earn herself a few much-needed extra rupees. The loss of her mother-in-law was yet another burden for

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<sup>2</sup> *rannaghor* means 'cooking-house' kitchen in Bengali and in Tarakhali was typically a small, separate space located outside of the main house where food would be cooked on an open fire.

her to shoulder, and I wondered whether her husband, in his all-consuming illness, was even aware of her passing.

Movement began around the body. The *chador* was slowly lifted to reveal the dead woman, cloaked in a white shroud, her face uncovered. Her head was bound in a piece of white cloth, that had been wrapped, framing her face from just above the eyebrows to under her chin. Her pale, milky blue eyes that swum with cataracts were still open. Gently, I was jostled to the front as those standing closest to the body retreated backwards making space for other mourners. It was the first dead body I had ever seen.

There was a problem. The woman's daughter, hurrying back from Delhi where she laboured in houses as a domestic worker, had not arrived in the village yet. A phone call confirmed that she was still at Canning, starting to make her way on the long, single road that led down to the Sundarbans. The plans to coincide the funeral rites with the one o'clock *namaz* had been frustrated by her absence, and the crowd began to disperse, agreeing to return once again at 4pm that afternoon, shortly before the next *azaan* would summon the faithful to prayer.

Back towards the main road, Nura stood on the path engaged in what looked like an intense conversation with a couple of other women that I didn't recognise. She faced towards me, her thick forearm shielding her eyes from the sun that despite this winter day blazed down with a fierce intensity normally reserved for summer. A sari and a plastic bottle were clasped to her side, indicating that she was on the way for her lunchtime bath in the pond, her four children at school, and her arduous morning chores completed. "okhane giyeche?" [You have been there?] she asked me, to which I nodded. She raised an eyebrow and squinting at me said "mrityo manush...sudhu tirish minits mathite thakbe" [Dead people...they'll only stay thirty minutes in the field (ground / earth)]. I waited, knowing by now the slow deliberateness with which Nura would reveal her stories, gently unfurling them like petals. Seconds passed. "tarpore...Allah tader jege uthben ar jibon pore mrityu sure korbe.....sasti hobe" [Afterwards....Allah will awaken them in the afterlife.....and judgement / punishment will happen].

The passing of *nani* Ashima had brought to the forefront of Nura's mind her favourite topic of conversation, that of what would happen after death and in the afterlife. Whether it was her deep religiosity, the drudgery of her days on earth or the interventions of the Tablighi Jama'at, known for promoting such a perspectival shift from the present to the hereafter, was never fully apparent. However, reluctant to continue what would undoubtedly be a rich and detailed conversation with an audience, we agreed that I would come to her house the following evening after she had dutifully

performed the 5 o'clock *namaz*, when we would end up talking long into the bitterly cold night, lit only by a wavering gas lamp.

Turning, I walked away from the main road towards Khozana's house in order to wait out the hot midday hours and catch up on the events of the wedding. When I arrived, it was clear that the crowd was much dispersed from yesterday, though there were still around twenty assorted family members present, chatting, washing, and lolling about in the shade.

The mood was strange. Khozana lacked her usual jocular bossiness, seemingly exhausted by the last few days of celebrations for the last of her six children to be wed and harried by the death next door which represented both a bad omen and had significantly muffled any celebration (Abu-Lughod 1993b: 190). Her small frame appeared even slighter, with her wet hair pulled back, her large and still beautiful eyes in a face softly crumpled with age. "thik na, thik na" [It's not good, not good] she muttered as she moved around purposefully, rearranging items, checking on her guests and quietly dispensing orders or instructions.

There was a lightening of the atmosphere with the distribution of my presents for the wedding party, the married couple pleased with their gifts and Khozana thrilled by the winter jumper from a shop in the nearby bazaar that she had firmly given me instructions to purchase for her. She hugged me, before sitting me down with a fresh coconut and a plate of stale biscuits where I became drawn into conversation with her eldest daughter Salma, reserved and serious, and her deeply religious husband about the existence of *jinn*. After a while, we were interrupted by Salma's younger sister, the charming and coquettish Khafiza, who sprawled languidly across the cot, chewing *paan* as we spoke about possible names for her unborn baby.

Shortly before four o'clock, the word was murmured through the crowd that *nani* Ashima's daughter had arrived and that the funeral rights would now take place this afternoon. With a quickness unusual for this hot and sluggish time of day, the men hurried to perform their ablutions and put on their white and pale blue *kurta pyjamas*, whilst the women drew their saris over their heads and moved across the field towards the homestead of the deceased. I hung back, watching as the women in the courtyard, in which I had stood hours earlier, parted in order to allow the arriving male relatives to claim the body. Carefully, they hoisted it onto a bamboo pall and then onto shoulders, carrying it haltingly along the cracked, pale earth path to the main road. As they moved away, many of the women cried out "oh nani!", turning and embracing one another. For them, as women, this was where the final farewells would be said.

The procession moved down the main road towards the *boro masjid*, where the body was set down on a raised platform outside of the mosque. I followed the men at a distance, walking further down the

road to the Loskor family's tea shop and their compound set behind it, from where I knew the events could be seen across the grey-green murkiness of the pond. Reenu ran up to greet me, saying "*didi!* esho" [Sister! Come], grabbing my hand and tugging me down the dirt path until we stopped alongside a tree at the edge of the brackish water. She was visibly intrigued by what was happening, perhaps using the presence of her elder, ethnographer sister to flout the normal rules of propriety that denied women any access to the funerary rights or burial here, forbidding them even from setting foot into graveyards. Glancing at her sideways, I noticed her wide eyes, the dark hair just starting to show on her upper lip, the awkward age between childhood and adult female responsibility, meaning it would not be too long before she would be married.

"sssss!" We turned around to see Aksha looking at us sternly and gesturing to a place further behind the trees, where though the view of the mosque was partly obscured, no one would be able to see us. She joined us there, fishing a rusted tin box from the folds of her sari and adeptly making herself another package of *paan* to wedge into her already reddening mouth. Having tucked the parcel into her cheek, she began to gossip.

"The situation that woman was left in, in her life was appalling. No-one helped, no-one gave money, and now they jump on planes from Mumbai and Delhi to be here...". She recounted a story in which *nani* Ashima had asked for tea, only to be told "*cha hobe na!*" [tea isn't going to happen!]. And now they cry? Pathetic. After the turbulence of the preceding few days, it was vaguely reassuring that not even death could temper Aksha's caustic and forthright nature. Soon, the men filed out of the mosque and formed a long, single line in front of the body. Here they said a further prayer, pale clad forms lowering and rising in a similar though disparately timed manner, like little waves splashing and breaking on rocks along a shore.

I walked slowly back to the roadside, just in time to see Sara arrive home on the back of a motorcycle. She alighted, exuding her characteristic glamour and poise with her plump form gracefully and stylishly clad and sporting large, dark sunglasses. She thanked the driver, and waved him off with a laugh, knowing he had been only too happy to ferry such alluring cargo. Aware of her audience, she waved to me, shouting across the road in English "are you coming?" gesturing behind her to the house with a backwards nod of her head. We had agreed to catch up that afternoon so I could fill her in on the events of Mubarak's wedding [I want to know everything...what a shame it wasn't a good quality wedding for you to see!]

I crossed the tarmac, watching Sara disappear inside as she called for her daughter-in-law to make tea and prepare some snacks. At her gate at the end of the brick path leading to her home, I looked back over my shoulder and saw the men in their pale *kurta pyjamas* bearing the deceased down the main,

tarmac road towards the graveyard that lies on the southern edge of the village. Figures, slowly, disappearing into the dusk.

[REDCATED]

Figure 2: Evening in Tarakhali

## ii. Theoretical Orientations and Structure

### *“gorur mangsho khao na”: Muslims in India in 2018*

The words had been painted on the tarmac in a bright yellow, the kind used to draw double lines flanking pavements or to convey prohibitions such as No Entry. Here, just four words had been written on the road in front of the butcher’s cart in [REDACTED], part firm instruction, part ominous threat: *gorur magsho khao na* [don’t eat cow meat].

Elsewhere in India, other Muslims had not been as lucky. In September 2015 just a few months before, 52-year-old Mohammed Akhlaq had been dragged from his home in the Dadri district of Uttar Pradesh and beaten and hacked to death by a violent mob. They had accused him, incorrectly it would later emerge, of slaughtering a calf, and consuming the meat. The rearing, slaughtering and eating of beef by Indian Muslims, Dalits and Christians, who lack the Brahmanical proscriptions against its consumption, has under the BJP government become a highly stigmatised and in many Indian states, legally prohibited, practice. In Tarakhali where the meat is both the most affordable and widely cherished, typically reserved for once weekly or special occasions such as Eid, this is something that has in recent years here, as elsewhere, come to represent the primary fault line of Hindu and Muslim violence.

The Muslim population of India according to the most recent 2011 census represents 14.2% of the total, or around 172 million people. Stretching across the length and breadth of the country, Indian Muslims represent a bewildering linguistic, social, cultural and religious diversity (Banerjee 2010; Metcalf 2009a) that is often obscured (Hasan 2001; Khan 2008) in the desire to underscore links between the nationwide Islamic community as a whole, as opposed to the connections and similarities with those they live amongst. Yet though certain Muslims, such as those in Kerala who have forged profitable links with the Gulf (Osella & Osella 2009), possess high levels of education and social mobility, it may be said of the majority that they experience significant disenfranchisement and marginalisation.

It has been twelve years since the publication of the Sachar Committee Report in 2006, the government commissioned study that revealed the shocking extent to which Muslims were marginalized, excluded and discriminated against across India (SCR 2006). This included extremely high levels of poverty amongst the community, minimal representation across all branches of government and state employment, and poor access to infrastructure and resources such as healthcare and education due to a religious bias in where they are located (ibid). The report highlighted that there

existed for Muslims in India “a double burden of being labelled as “anti-national” and as being “appeased” at the same time” (SCR 2006: 11).

Many myths pertaining to Muslim lives and experiences were dispelled by the findings. Low levels of education and literacy were revealed to be the result of poverty as opposed to religious conservatism (only 3% of children attend Islamic *madrasa* schools full time). Access to public finances were shown to be truly stigmatised: the amount of a bank loan for a Muslim is likely to range between two thirds and 50% less than that offered to any other group in India (ibid). Poor representation in official government employment was not imaginary. Although Indian Muslims were 14% of the population, they composed just 2.5% of Indian bureaucrats (ibid).

Since the report’s publication, arguably very little has changed for India’s Muslims. If anything, the deep ripples of mistrust and fear generated by the Mumbai terror attacks by terrorists from Pakistan in 2008 conjoined with the election in 2014 of the right-wing BJP government led by Narendra Modi, which once again has heightened the public culture of religious politics as was seen during their previous political heyday (Blom-Hansen 1999), have created a current climate in which Muslims are more openly discriminated against and viewed with increasing hostility.

In West Bengal, where Muslims are a high 27% of the state population, around 25 million people, decades of Left Front Communist rule have been revealed to have achieved very little. A recent survey by economist Amartya’s Sen’s Pratichi Trust in collaboration with other civil society organizations (SNAP 2016), chronicled the extreme poverty, the wilful direction away of state funded resources, lowest education levels and worst sanitation that are all to be found amongst Muslim communities in the state. It revealed that more than 80% of rural Muslim households in West Bengal survive on a monthly income of R5,000 or less, the amount set as the poverty line and the equivalent of around £50. A staggering 47% of the working Muslim population are day labourers, meaning they lack permanent employment and are instead reliant on infrequent day work and fluctuating access to the labour market. Almost unbelievably, 13.2% of eligible Muslims do not have a voter ID card, the key form of documentation in India and something necessary to obtain all other social benefits.

In an ostensibly secular nation, the persistent inequality endured by Indian Muslims thus deserves close consideration (Gayer & Jaffrelot 2012; Williams 2012). Muslim communities across India are increasingly spatially marginalised, with religious fault lines dividing and excluding Muslims from public areas as much in cosmopolitan urban centres (Blom-Hansen 2001; Gayer & Jaffrelot 2012) as in rural localities (Chatterji 2007; Gottschalk 2000). The resulting ghettoization frustrates access to state resources and neutral outside spaces, and in doing so further exacerbates the differences that do exist between Muslims and others (Jeffery & Jeffery 2006; Khan 2008).



These differences, real or imagined, have drawn significant scholarship in recent decades (Blom-Hansen 1999; Brass 1997; 2003; Gottschalk 2000; Hasan 2001; Pandey 1990; Van Der Veer 1994; Varshney 2002). In their most shocking incarnation they become manifest in events of horrific violence, such as the pogroms of “unprecedented savagery” (Mishra 2012) in Gujarat in 2002 in which more than 2000 Muslims were killed by vigilante mobs after a train carrying Hindu pilgrims caught alight. That India’s current Prime Minister was State Minister of Gujarat at the time, who at best allowed this orchestrated violence to happen and at worst deliberately encouraged and facilitated it (Sarkar 2002), only deepens a sense of lingering injustice and unease.

If there was one thing that was perhaps most horrifically striking in Gujarat, it was the extreme violence shown towards Muslim women (Sarkar 2002). Often rendered invisible due to the simple collapsing of distinct gender categories into ‘Muslim’ (Hasan & Menon 2014) or alternatively an excessive focus on Muslim Personal Law and its negative and restrictive impact on them (Hasan & Menon 2014; Vatuk 2008; 2009), Muslim women in India outside of the areas of law and religion are often overlooked. This extreme and publicly performed brutality however thrust them into the public consciousness.

There exists frustratingly little ethnographic exploration of Muslim women’s lives, experiences and understandings in India. Studies that do exist, though illuminating, are often narrowly confined to subject areas typically associated with the lives of Muslim women everywhere. These include explorations of the practices of *purdah* (Jeffery 1979; Lateef 1990), experiences of marriage and divorce, particularly the role of Muslim Personal Law and the role played by the practice of *talaq*<sup>3</sup> (Vatuk 2008; 2009) and the absence of equal human, legal and civil rights (Basu 2003; 2008).

Others reflect what they identify as a social phenomenon, namely the perception of women, and Muslim women in particular, as somehow the embodiment of the values and practices significant to that group more widely. The Sachar report itself questionably identified Muslim women as somehow the bearers or embodiments of their community (SCR 2006). This means that when Islam is seen to be under attack, in turn areas beyond their homes and villages become demarcated by Muslim women themselves as “unsafe and hostile” (SCR 2006: 13), something reflected elsewhere (Khan 2008). In West Bengal where the educated and aspirational Bengali woman is perhaps seen as an “ideal representative of the modern nation” (Azim 2011: 87) Muslim women are somehow therefore regarded as inherently unsettling and contradictory (Azim 2011). Yet what of the ways in which

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<sup>3</sup> The practice whereby an Islamic divorce is granted on the basis of uttering the word ‘*talaq*’ three times.

these women see and identify themselves? What of “the multiple identifications that emerge through women’s narratives alongside their identity as Muslim women” (Kirmani 2009: 50)?

### *Women’s Lives in South Asia and Beyond*

Vivid depictions of the lives of women in South Asia often adopt unusual authorial or stylistic techniques. They may take the form of biographical accounts (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996; Grima 2004) or utilise a style and tone more narrative in essence (Gardner 1991; Pinto 2014). The rationale behind the adoption of such a stance is frequently cited as being in order to better capture or convey the defiant complexities of women’s lives that resist simplistic or neat categorisation. Intriguingly, such approaches always seem to elicit an explanation or even an apology of sorts by their authors (Abu-Lughod 1993a; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996) whereas abstracted and theoretically driven analyses rarely do. Perhaps those daring to try to write women’s lives (Abu-Lughod 1993a) are themselves “painfully aware of the perils involved in presuming to speak with any authority about women whose lives are so different from our own” (Raheja & Gold 1994: 8).

These explorations attempt to move beyond the superficial and surface level tropes of the female in South Asia, in which a woman has “all too frequently been portrayed as a silent shadow” (Raheja & Gold 1994: 3). Women are often largely ethnographically invisible in these contexts (Jeffery 1979), their lives assumed to have no influence or impact beyond the private and domestic spheres (Fruzetti 1982; Jeffery 1979). Where they do appear, they are often labelled as the bearers of tradition (Chatterjee 1989; Raheja & Gold 1994), a mantle that frustrates their attempts to be seen outside of the contexts of oppressive patriarchy and sometimes violent gender norms.

Some authors have instead prioritised listening, exploring women’s lives through the rich practices of vibrant female aural traditions (Grima 1992; Raheja & Gold 1994). In doing so they have underscored (un)articulated agency, reminding us that “submission and silence may be conscious strategies of self-representation” (Raheja & Gold 1994: 11) whilst rude songs and dirty jokes signify women’s deep recognition of “the power of words” (Raheja & Gold 1994: 187). The significance of emotions and their vocalisation as ways in which the world can be made and understood by women offers an embodied recognition and critique of the “gender schism” (Grima 1992: 50) that divides the lives of women and men from the moment of birth.

In West Bengal, female lives have been approached thematically through marriage (Fruzetti 1982), ageing and the body (Lamb 2000), and middle-class experiences of motherhood and modernity (Donner 2008). Elsewhere in India, others have slipped behind the curtains of *purdah* to reveal the richness of women’s lives lived in seclusion and secrecy (Jeffery 1979), underscoring the ripples of

their praxis far beyond these private domains. All of these accounts emphasise the shaping and mutually constructive relationships between men and women as “equally gendered beings...neither can be understood in isolation from the other and from the broader social worlds in which gender identities are constituted” (Lamb 2000: 21).

Yet it could be asked whether an underlying focus on the capacity for agency and resistance, be it through everyday actions (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996: 14-18), song or aural traditions (Raheja & Gold 1994) or the management of intra-group politics (Ring 2006) is yet another way of tacitly privileging an interest in whether they, as (Muslim) women, are somehow disenfranchised and oppressed. Is there still a lingering limitation in assuming that aural practices, marriage, gender, kinship, sexuality and ageing are where women’s lives should be investigated? And that whilst these things are undoubtedly of significance, that there exist other areas requiring focus such as encounters with religious reformism or experiences of global labour dynamics and state bureaucracy?

More recent accounts have built upon these formative explorations to foreground examinations of South Asian women’s lives in newly unfurling, stereotypically ‘male’ domains of labour. In large Indian cities, Patel explores the ways in which night shift call centre work is creating new spaces and social networks for female employees though simultaneously drawing them into the “structural inequality embedded in global relations” (Patel 2010: 122). In Bangladesh, Huang shows how young women employed with iAgent micro-credit schemes experience the shift from familial and patronage systems of support to the detached capitalist logics of the labour market (2016). Both analyses offer compelling accounts of how young women’s lives are changing and becoming increasingly entwined with rapid economic transformations that bring both opportunities and additional complexity.

In Pakistan, though ostensibly confining her analysis to the private domestic world of Muslim women, Ring significantly expands upon earlier accounts centred around women’s seclusion (Jeffery 1979). Her analysis of the “poetics of intergroup cooperation” (Ring 2006: 3) within a Karachi apartment block works to challenge assumptions that debates surrounding contested categories such as Pakistani ethnicity and Islamic sectarian divisions play out solely in the male sphere. Instead she demonstrates the complex and often contradictory work of women in mitigating ethnic tensions and underscores their refusal to articulate such debates as “themselves political practices” (Ring 2006: 4).

This thesis will contribute to this small number of ethnographies of women’s lives in South Asia, filling a notable gap by offering a sustained focus on rural dwelling Muslim women’s livelihoods. In it I will seek to combine the lens of more traditional accounts, my focus being “arbitrarily” (Candea 2007) located within a single village, and their deep exploration of the way in which women live, with new investigative frameworks that seek to see women’s lives as a totality, implicated in a variety of

different domains. As will become clear in what follows, the arbitrary constraint of my focus around the village of Tarakhali is not understood as a return to ‘traditional’ ethnography (Candea 2007), rather it should be viewed alongside such other chosen field sites elsewhere as “methodological instruments for deferring closure and challenging totality” (Candea 2007:169). In doing so, I hope to highlight the impossibility of constraining women’s lives to a single location, with paths and connections snaking to government offices, towards families left behind in other, similar villages, or to imagined Muslim homelands across the Indian Ocean in the Middle East.

This is not to say that I will not consider aspects prominent in older ethnographic explorations, such as kinship, marriage and domestic labour. However, these are some amongst other elements including bureaucratic interactions, work, possession and the discord experienced by new forms of knowledge and experience as “moments in which language’s ability to tell the truth reaches its end” (Pinto 2014: 7).

It is important to note that the scope of this investigation is one that though endorsed by me has been set by my collaborators. I have followed them down the paths where they chose to take me, allowing them frequently to dictate the course of our conversations and thus my ethnographic explorations. This means that I have spent unexpected hours listening to women rant about bureaucracy and corruption or discuss with a morbid fascination the brutal punishments that will be meted after death to those who sin. In allowing them to lead me where it is they are interested in going, I have done my best to fully embody my commitment to their lives and experiences.

In doing so I will be making a bolder claim, following those who have sought to show how the lives and experiences of those on the conceptual or actual peripheries can in fact tell us a great deal about what is happening more broadly (Pinto 2014; Tsing 1993). The assumption that answers to dominant and encompassing questions will be found in the centres as opposed to at the edges is inverted in Pinto’s moving exploration of women’s mental health in India, in which she elegantly conveys that discoveries about the treatment of madness and the practices of psychiatric medicine may reveal “a way of enforcing what society views to be “normal”” (Pinto 2014: 22). Mental illness and its treatment is thus shown to be constitutive of the spaces in which gender, kinship and marriage fall apart, allowing their innate qualities and pervading cultural representations to be teased open.

In Indonesia, Anna Tsing’s charismatic Uma Adang reveals to us the ways in which one woman’s radical and unusual approach to state domination and enforced political marginality can tell us more about a society than is perhaps imaginable (Tsing 1993). This is not to suggest a path of analysis in which aberrations somehow enforce forms of normality (Tsing 1993: 36) rather one which seeks to

show how close attention to the lives and experiences of those on the margins reminds us of the intensity of everyday negotiations of power, violence and possibility taking place everywhere.

### *Violence and Possibility*

Throughout this thesis, I will seek to underscore the violence of these women's everyday lives. It is through a person-centred approach intent on carefully teasing apart the layers through which women in this village are shaped and created, and themselves exert agency and engage in deeply personal projects of being and becoming, that I have been drawn to the encounters, negotiations and possibilities of and with violence. In this way, I am exploring violence as an "unstable" (Das 2007) element of the shared social within Tarakhali "*and* in the subjectivity of personal experience" (Kleinman 2000: 238).

Though violence has been widely examined in a South Asia context, this has typically been in relation to extra-ordinary moments (Das 1990; 1995; 2007) or amongst collectives (Brass 2003; Spencer 2004). Explorations considering every day, individual experiences of violence, particularly amongst women, are therefore surprisingly and frustratingly limited (Karlekar 2004). Consequently, what follows will fill a significant gap in exploring everyday violence, through how impoverished Muslim women living in rural India encounter, negotiate with and transcend forms and instantiations of violence throughout their lives on a continuous basis.

In foregrounding violence in the everyday, I have set out to intertwine two distinct thematic approaches to its analysis within anthropology and more widely: those that are explicit in their theoretical and thematic engagement with the concept of violence (Das 1990; 1995; 2000; 2007; Kleinman 2000); and others who explore the determined, creative resolution with which those on the margins seek to overcome the violences of everyday existence (Han 2012; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Tsing 1993). In doing so I hope to provide the theoretical concept of violence with the weight it deserves in my analysis whilst mirroring ethnographies within which there exists the sensitivity and holism which situates it as part of dynamic, agentive life worlds, in which potentiality and possibility are as significantly present.

The work of Veena Das has been hugely influential in shaping studies of violence both within South Asia (Das 1990; 1995; 1996; 2007) and more widely (2000; 2013). In what follows I will draw significantly on her rich body of work and her fundamental determination to adopt a fluid, loose and unconstrained definition of what violence actually is, and the both destructive and creative potentialities that violence might represent (Das 2007). Inherent within this approach is her call (2013) for an extension to existing ethnographic and theoretical explorations of violence, in part

resulting from the expansion of a definition “to include the normal and the critical, the everyday and the event, within its ambit” (Das 2013: 800).

In particular, I will seek to follow Das in her elegant mediation between wider, shared, collective moments of violence (which in her work are centred around the events of Partition in 1947 and the Anti-Sikh riots that occurred in Delhi following Indira Gandhi’s assassination) and its deeply local, individual instantiations and subjective mediations (Das 1990; 2007). The ability of such an approach to facilitate the articulation between wider movements, ‘events’ (Das 1995) and currents within Indian society and the individual lives and experiences of women in this village will reveal itself to be something of particular significance given the prominent and contested nature of the role and place of both Islam, and women, within the Indian nation at this present moment.

The public imagination of the Muslim woman’s body as a site of worryingly abundant fertility and potential for violence is something that has been enacted and underscored in communal sentiments and riots stemming from Indian Independence up until the present day (Gangoli 2007: 48). The horrific sexual violence Gujarati Muslim women were subjected to in the pogroms in 2002 is understood as indicative of the “dark sexual obsession” (Sarkar 2002: 2874) generated by their physicality, which is thus targeted in moments of “collective dishonouring” (Sarkar 2002: 2875). This mirrors wider currents of gendered sexual violence within South Asia, where women’s bodies have become brutally contested national symbols (Das 1990; Mookherjee 2006; 2015) and “a site of almost inexhaustible violence” (Sarkar 2002: 2875).

Though I recognise the significance of such wider imaginings and extraordinary moments for Muslim women’s subjectivities here, I do so with caution. Broadly rendered explorations of South Asian and Muslim women’s lives in simplistic terms of violence have been understandably heavily criticised (Mohanty 1988; 2002; Spivak 1978; 1987; 1994). In particular, those such as Mohanty have sought to problematise any facile import of Western feminist theoretical conceptions or assumptions of female gendered equality into other ethnographic contexts, drawing necessary connections between such discourses and colonial ones in which women inevitably become defined “as archetypal victims” (Mohanty 1988: 67). Thus, though acknowledging the interplay between everyday experiences and such ‘critical’ events (Das 1995) I recognise that they must “must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies” (Mohanty 1988: 67).

Reflecting this sensitivity and specificity, I will foreground in what follows what women in Tarakhali themselves identify as forms of unacceptable everyday violence and tension. What will emerge in the second chapter is their nuanced understanding of violence as the existence of possibility: of there being the option of another, alternative and, at least to them, preferable path, which is either

overlooked or ignored. In her explorations of female empowerment, Kabeer identifies the significance of “the possibility of alternatives” (Kabeer 1999: 437) as a necessary component of women’s empowered choice and agency. Thus, through an inversion of her understanding, violently executed disempowerment here exists for the women in Tarakhali when the violences of the everyday (Kleinman 2000) occur in spite of the existence of other possible courses of actions which though available, remain unfulfilled.

Anthropology has made little room for “local women travellers who comment from the margins of ordinary experience” (Tsing 1993: 220). Tsing underlines the challenges faced by female ethnographers studying women, in particular the pressure to explore the lives of somehow ‘typical’ or ‘representative’ groups of women who remain within tightly drawn cultural boundaries (ibid 220-225). As with some of the marginal Meratus female figures of Tsing’s ethnography, there may exist the sense that these Bengali Muslim women’s lives lived on the fringes of India in extreme and challenging conditions have little salience for other everyday lives.

Yet I hope throughout to underscore that these women’s narratives may in fact be placed in conversation with much wider themes and experiences in diverse and distant locations. Following Mohanty, I will consequently argue that from “beginning from the lives and interests of marginalized communities of women, I am able to access and make the workings of power visible” (Mohanty 2002: 511). Consequently, the interactions between the women of Tarakhali and the supernatural presences of *jinn* may have resonance for others living in moments of deep crisis and perpetual temporal uncertainty (Vigh 2008). In the realms of labour, their tussles with gender norms, structural societal imbalances and competing and conflicted understandings of female empowerment may embody similar contestations occurring in other diverse locations. Finally, their dynamic religious encounters and the explorations of the role played by Islam within their lives may speak to all those who dwell on the alluring possibilities of better futures.

In her vivid ethnography chronicling the poverty, debt, addiction and aftershocks of state violence in a Chilean neighbourhood, Clara Han provides an account that “acknowledges suffering engages and responds to a specific life and world” (Han 2012: 23-24). Her collaborators’ struggles to overcome acts of horrific political violence, navigate drug addiction and the devastation it wreaks on individual bodies as well family networks, and the challenges posed through mediating economic and kin obligations are reiterated throughout. Though an entirely different context, the dense networks of overlapping narratives, experiences and violences within this locally rooted and intertwined community is something that continuously brought to mind the village and lives within it with which I had become familiar in my own field site.

In spite of everything, there exists a steady, underlying beat throughout Han's ethnography of the infinite labours undertaken by her collaborators in order to "live with dignity" (Han 2012: 69), something to which we arguably all aspire. In this way, Han too enables that mediation from deeply specific experiences and circumstances to wider themes and life projects. In doing so, she does not shy away from naming and acknowledging the violence that characterises the lives of those she works with, though she continuously refuses to reduce them to it, instead highlighting the various ways in which they navigate their circumstances and resolutely strive towards different and more hopeful futures. In this way I hope to mirror her sensitive and insightful handling of fragile yet determined lives, that illuminate the need to "appreciate everyday life as an achievement" (Han 2012: 233).

### *Living Islam*

If the current situation of Muslims in India is one of economic and social precarity conjoined with public marginalisation, this thesis looks to build upon the work of those who explore how they negotiate this pervasive discrimination in the present moment, and in doing so deploy a range of diverse strategies in attempts to transcend it (Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffery 2008; Williams 2011). Complementing this stance is one that seeks to undercut popular representations of Indian Muslims that assume that by default their Muslim-ness will be the most defining and important thing about them (Grillo 2004; Soares & Osella 2010) something particularly significant here given prominent yet much critiqued representations of Islam as in essence foreign and antagonistic to the Indian Hindu majority (Gilmartin & Lawrence 2000).

Islam is thus approached in what follows through how it is understood, embodied, and questioned by the women in Tarakhali, in all its local diversity, as opposed to what it, in itself, is. I have sought in what follows to prioritise their understandings of their religion, themselves and their actions, in Islamic terms or not. In adopting this stance, I follow others in the simple belief that: "If we want to understand what it means to live a Muslim life, then we need a grounded and nuanced understanding of what it means to live a life – more urgently than we need a sophisticated theory about what Islam is" (Schielke 2010: 5).

Anthropological studies of 'lived' or 'living' Islam have generated a diverse and fascinating body of work that explores in all its uniqueness and variety "what it is to live a Muslim life" (Marsden 2005:1) around the world (Liberatore 2013; Marsden and Retsikas 2013; Mittermaier 2012; Schielke 2009; 2010; Simon 2012). The origins of this approach are traced by many to the work of Talal Asad, who, over thirty years ago when the so-called anthropology of Islam was in its infancy, drew attention to its discursive, fluctuating and ever evolving nature (Asad 1986).



In the geographic context of South Asia, in which layers of religious praxis and beliefs have accumulated on top of one another and where Muslims themselves shift from majority to minority in a couple of kilometres across intensely scrutinised borders, the nuances of this approach have been particularly fruitful (Ahmad and Reifeld 2004; Marsden 2005; Soares & Osella 2010). Significantly, such explorations have served to disrupt problematic representations of localised, ‘folk’ Islamic beliefs coming into contact with austere and unwanted reformist tenets, instead elucidating the continual renegotiation with ideas and beliefs conjoined with an openness and willingness to consider alternative perspectives that Muslims regularly practice and engage in (Marsden 2005; 2008; Osella & Osella 2008a). As with some of these other studies of lived Islam in South Asia (Marsden 2005; 2008; Osella & Osella 2008a) I will consider how the women of Tarakhali are encountering and interacting with a specific Islamic reformist movement, the Tablighi Jama’at, that has become an increasingly prominent presence within their village over recent decades.

Barbara Metcalf has written extensively about the Tablighi Jama’at in India, identifying them as a “quietist, apolitical movement of spiritual guidance and renewal that originated in the Indian subcontinent, whose networks now reach around the world” (Metcalf 1996). Established in the 1920s, the group’s ethos is a return to original principles, encouraging Sunni Muslims to reform their practices in keeping with a strict, revisionist ideology, whilst also fostering networks amongst the wider Islamic community. These connections are formed through ‘missions’ or tours, in which small groups travel between villages and towns, spending periods of time in each place where they will interact with previously unknown fellow Muslims and instruct them in the correct way to practice Islam, before moving on again.

Unlike other reformist groups with a strong presence in South Asia such as the Jama’at-e-Islami (Ahmad 2009), the Tablighi Jama’at are thus less concerned with converting non-believers to the Islamic faith, or in influencing or articulating a particular political agenda (Huq 2008: 462), and instead “put their weight wholly at the end of reshaping individual lives” (Metcalf 2002). As such this “highly decentralised and voluntary movement” (Metcalf 2009b: 241) has come to represent the largest Islamic movement today (Metcalf 2009a; Robinson 2008) that works through a deeply localised and approachable presence in countries and communities across the globe, promoting the conviction that adherence to the tenets they espouse not only represents the one true, correct path, but possesses the power to globally shape Islam and impact others.

Perhaps due to their largely decentralised structure (Metcalf 2009b) and reluctant public persona (Sikand 1999), ethnographically focused studies of the Tablighi Jama’at across South Asia are relatively few (Metcalf 2003; 2009b; Sikand 1999), particularly given how pervasive the movement is. Further, as with other studies of encounters between reformist groups and local populations (Huq

2008; 2009; Osella & Osella 2008a; 2008b), these encounters have typically been in relation to young, urban middle-class populations, as they have in studies of the Tablighi Jama'at elsewhere (Janson 2013). This thesis thus represents a significant departure and an original insight by exploring how rural, impoverished, Indian and uneducated women undergo encounters with this particular variant of Islamic reformism.

In this way I will also contribute to and build upon accounts of Islamic reformism and the interplay between selfhood and religiously motivated ethical practice amongst women (Liberatore 2013; Mahmood 2005). Mahmood's deeply original ethnography of engagements by middle-class Muslim women in Cairo with Islamic reformism problematized much of the literature surrounding the female embrace of piety movements that characterised this as symptomatic of the internalization of patriarchy and existence of false consciousness (Mahmood 2005). Through a focus on the desire women have themselves to unconsciously seek to embody things in-keeping with reformist ideological tenets, Mahmood dismantled the idea of an innate, unfettered yearning for behaviour that defies such prescriptions.

Yet, as others have noted, Mahmood's exploration is constrained in its insight by the tightly drawn focus she adopts to praxis occurring solely within prayer meetings or religious spaces, thus failing to take into account the undoubtedly significant role of wider everyday life and experiences (Liberatore 2013; Van der Veer 2008). I will follow others in paying far closer attention to how reformist tenets are understood and grappled with in the space of everyday actions (Liberatore 2013; Marsden 2008; Schielke 2009; 2010; Simon 2012). This becomes of particular significance when remembering that Muslims represent a religious minority within India, thus making their experiences more similar perhaps to those in other global locations in which Islamophobia and Muslim exclusion made a very visible and public declaration and adoption of faith a compelling though complicated option (Jacobsen 2011; Liberatore 2013).

This thesis offers a further alternative perspective on encounters with Islamic reformism due to the absence of texts and the entailed textual interpretation that has proved so important in other contexts (Huq 2008; Marsden 2005; 2008). For women in Tarakhali at this moment, largely illiterate and even if able to read any Arabic, unable to understand it, reformist principles are encountered as untethered from their book-based instantiations or verifications, becoming living entities as the words spoken in sermons listened to during Sunday prayer meetings (Hirschkind 2006), admonishments from one's husband or debated in conversations with one's neighbours. An absence of education and literacy sets these rural women's experiences apart from those elsewhere (Huq 2008; Marsden 2008), and as such frustrates their ability to publicly debate or critique the religious reforms and visions proposed by the Tablighi Jama'at. The desire amongst them to change this is significant and, as will emerge further in

Chapter 7, the need to learn to read in order to be able to understand and interpret the *Quran* themselves in order to obtain Islamic equality and female freedom was identified as these women's primary desire and passionate dream for the future.

Uncertainty over the paths that lie before them also manifests itself here in encounters with the Islamic supernatural presences of *jinn*, as will be explored in detail in Chapter 4. *Jinn* are otherworldly presences intimately entwined with the beliefs of those belonging to the Islamic faith around the world (Crapanzano 1973; Parkhurst 2013; Rothenberg 1998). Mentioned at several points throughout the *Quran*, *jinn* are thought to be created by Allah from a flameless fire and possess extraordinary capacities. As with humans, they are capable of embodying both good and evil, and by nature of their name, *jinn* literally meaning concealed or hidden in Arabic, we are unable to see them.

Within South Asia, *jinn* enjoy a rich history both in popular culture (Dalrymple 1993) and in anthropology (Bellamy 2011; Khan 2006; Taneja 2013; 2017). In Tarakhali, relationships with *jinn* that were formerly based around gift-giving exchange and teasing have begun to transform into violent and unpredictable encounters in which women are increasingly becoming "caught" (Favret-Saada 1981). In contrast to recent research in Delhi, *jinn* in Tarakhali do not represent an approachable presence, sought out for mediations with the past and to strengthen recollections and memories (Taneja 2013; 2017). Instead they have come to represent a disruptive force that is becoming increasingly problematic.

### *Spaces of Labour & Politics*

The spaces of work and labour for Muslims at this point in India are as scrutinised and stigmatised as the other aspects of their lives. Significant economic marginalisation experienced across the community means that many Muslims develop the "precarious mix" (Corbridge & Shah 2013: 335) of "compensatory strategies" (Blom-Hansen 2001: 160) on the peripheries of the labour market, in order to survive and support their families. By exploring the flourishing engagement between impoverished rural Muslim women and what will emerge to be as they experience it, a predatory Indian economy, this thesis will contribute significantly to literature on work in South Asia by exploring labour from a unique ethnographic perspective.

The need to expand the formerly narrow definition of labour in order to incorporate domestic, affective and caring focused forms of work has informed significant discussions within anthropology in the preceding decades (Boris & Pareñas 2010; England & Folbre 1999; Moore 1988; Roy & Qayum 2009). Inherent within these discussions has been the recognition that these are typically female professions, thus the poor remuneration and lack of recognition feed into wider discussions

around gender, (in)equality and work. Across South Asia, patriarchal norms, religious prescriptions and rapidly changing labour markets have long posed additional challenges for working women (Fernandes 1997; Sharma 1980; 1986; Vatuk 2010)

Whilst these theoretical concerns have informed global academic debates, in the highly localised village world of Tarakhali, a similarly disruptive sociological and demographic reconfiguration has also taken place. In the past twenty years women in this village have entered the labour market, dramatically altering the work and financial landscape in many significant ways. The most recent Indian census from 2011 estimated that almost 31% were involved in some form of informal labour. Nonetheless they remain, at least in the eyes of their male counterparts, as subservient and of lower status, in spite of their increasing economic and political value. This is largely because the predominant form of work that they perform, *dadar kaj* embroidery work, can be done alongside other varieties of domestic labour within their homes, whilst the gendered allocation of domestic labour remains “extraordinarily rigid” (Harriss-White 2010: 173).

The prevalence of women involved in home-based work within the sewing or embroidery professions across India is diverse and significant (Mies 1982; Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Studies have illustrated the intense contradictions experienced by these ‘invisible’ female labour forces, as they balance domestic chores and responsibilities with (low) paid work conducted within a space that by definition remains officially unseen and thus undervalued (Singh & Kelles-Vitanen 1987; Boris & Prugl 1996). Its negative aspects often remain overlooked by these women however, as unskilled sewing work continues to represent “one of the only sources of cash for women who lack education, skill and experience and are otherwise prevented by the requirements of family honour from seeking jobs outside of the home” (Wilkinson-Weber 1999: 66). Their precarious situation is in stark contrast to the success in other areas of the informal Indian economy of female cooperative organisations such as SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association) that have gained gender pay-parity and improved conditions for their members (Harriss-White 2003).

Intimately involved with the *dadar kaj* industry in this village is another new arrival in the form of microfinance. Developed by Mohammed Yunus in Bangladesh during the 1980s, where, in conjunction with the garment industry, they have transformed the female labour landscape, micro-credit and micro-loan organisations have become a pervasive global presence acknowledged to have provided millions of impoverished women with access to financial capital (Huang 2016; Karim 2011).

In practice, microfinance and microcredit programmes have been both widely celebrated as well as heavily criticised (Kabeer 2005; Visvanathan and Yoder 2011). Within a South Asian context, it has been noted that the path to female empowerment is not a direct corollary of financial inclusion, with

many noting that involvement with microfinance schemes may not only not produce greater economic autonomy but may result in increased domestic violence (Chakravarti 2008; Goetz & Sen Gupta 1996; Kar 2018; Leach & Sitaram 2002). Microfinance structures may also place undue pressure on group members to make unrealistic repayments (Karim 2011) or result in unwanted or unnecessary scrutiny of male kin relationships necessary to acquire loans “ostensibly designed for women’s empowerment” (Kar 2017: 303). In what follows, I will echo others in critiquing microfinance as it is manifested in Tarakhali, particularly with respect to its reinforcement of existing stereotypes including the private, household domain as the one which women and their labour should occupy.

In her ethnography of female call centre workers across three Indian cities, Patel reiterates challenges from other studies of the exploitation of third-world female workers (Wright 2006) that have called into question the use of the public versus private labour binary in relation to male and female labour (Patel 2010). Patel argues that these terms bluntly fail to recognise the nuances of individual context and the significant overlap between so-called private and public spheres, whilst further implying that men and women do in fact “belong in distinct categories” (Patel 2010: 8). Her arguments problematise that a gendered public and private distinction in India, identified as intrinsically linked to colonialism and national resistance (Chatterjee 1989; Kaviraj 1997), is universally present. Further, she illustrates that by becoming encompassed within capitalist processes, young Indian women working night shifts to meet Western consumer demands are also becoming embroiled in meta-logics of global inequality and domination, as well as internalised industry norms that reify and compound existing class, caste and regional stratifications (Upadhyaya 2007). This significantly undermines the simplistic idea of public work as ultimately, or exclusively, beneficial and empowering (Patel 2010).

Within South Asia, this public and private distinction further fails to take into account the role of *pardah* in shaping women’s lives and expectations. Many Muslim women view it as their right not to work, and thus being compelled to join the labour market would be potentially both distressing and disempowering (Jeffery 1979; Wilkinson-Weber 1999). In this way as in many others, it may obscure the multitude of other related and contingent dynamics involved when women are working, which means that for those that do, it is far from a straightforward process (Gamburd 2010; Patel 2010).

When discussing women’s work in Chapter 5, I will therefore refer to inside and outside work as others have done (Huang 2016). These terms not only reflect this discomfort with existing terminology, they map more appropriately on to the nature of the work divide that occurs within Tarakhali itself, and most significantly, the way in which women here do not view the nature of work performed in the public and private spheres as different in essence. In addition, they mirror the ethnographic reality that anyone who has spent time in a rural Indian village can attest to, namely that homes are definitely not typically private spaces. The use of these terms further allows me to draw out

the inherent contradiction of women very publicly supporting their families yet being simultaneously publicly and privately denied any accompanying autonomy, status or financial control within their families. Finally, the foregrounding of ideas of inside and outside when exploring female labour will enable me to underscore a further important and unusual element of my analysis, which is the exploration of how Muslim women at the bottom of both the class and economic ladders think about work.

Many other ethnographies conducted with Muslim women elsewhere in South Asia are those in which there exists a moderate level of economic security and stability, and thus differing obligations and aspirations (Gardner 1991; Grima 1992; 2004; Huang 2016; Jeffery 1979). In Tarakhali, this was not the case. Women here did not have servants to cook their meals or perform housework (Gardner 1991; Grima 1992; 2004) nor did they have the sense that they were entitled as women to be supported financially by their husbands for their entire lives and consequently that working was somehow below them or a denigration of status (Jeffery 1979; Ring 2006; Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Further, they lacked the kinds of education necessary in order to take on what may have been regarded as challenging or interesting kinds of work within the burgeoning technology and micro-credit driven economy (Huang 2016; Patel 2010).

Their occupation of this low-class position in which ethical prohibitions of their own towards working were absent and they were simultaneously in significant financial need, meant that being kept inside and unable to work beyond the boundaries of the home was something experienced by them as even more challenging and frustrating. This was made particularly apparent by the envy exhibited towards the few who could work regularly outside of the home, those with coveted government jobs that were the most significant indexes of wealth and social status within the village.

There was only one other form of work that was regularly performed outside of the home by women in Tarakhali which I will call *shorkari kaj* (government work). Negotiating with local bureaucrats, correcting mistaken paper work, obtaining new identity documents or gaining inclusion on government handout schemes were all variants of this kind of work. In Chapter 6, I will delve into this world of political and bureaucratic labour which has in terms of personhood, time and money become an extremely valuable commodity to women here.

My approach will seek to combine the two broad perspectives of the existing literature on the Indian state as identified by Gellner (2013): accounts that chronicle the daily experiences and interactions of people with the state; and contrastingly, those that seek to ascertain what individuals expect from it. I will, therefore, explicitly consider how women in Tarakhali imagine the Indian state, specifically

through the realms of documentation and participation in elections, alongside the ways in which they interact with local bureaucrats on a daily basis in order to obtain tangible material benefits.

A focus on the rural instantiation of the Indian state and its practices as experienced by poor Muslim women offers the opportunity to tease apart the emergent gap between existing within and belonging to the Indian nation (Das & Poole 2004). In doing so, I will draw upon Bear and Mathur's notion of 'precarious citizenship' (Bear & Mathur 2015), illustrating through the give-and-take interactions and continual contestations that my collaborators have with the state and bureaucracy that their projects of political and bureaucratic citizenship are "not characterized by the dynamics of absolute inclusion and exclusion" (Bear & Mathur 2015: 28) and are instead something "partial" (Bear & Mathur 2015: 28) and contextually shifting.

Amongst the many rich ethnographies exploring low-level instantiations of South Asian bureaucracy (Brass 1997; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012; Mathur 2014; 2016), my interactions sit firmly on one side of the desk. In contrast to the hapless Uttar Pradesh development officials in Gupta's *Red Tape*, or the harassed bureaucrats in Mathur's work confronting a spate of leopard attacks in the Himalayas, those I worked with were not the arbiters of bureaucracy, but its requisite participants. In spite of this, explorations of these women's bureaucratic encounters provide relevant and needed insight into the often unseen daily machinations of low level bureaucracy (Fuller & Harriss 2001; Gupta 1995; 2012), adding richness and colour through describing what is happening to non-bureaucrats attempting to gain access to dusty offices and to slip behind paint-peeling doors. In doing so, I will join others (Gupta 1995) in exposing the paralysing dilemmas experienced by ordinary people with limited knowledge when confronted by the intricate workings of the state. This means necessarily considering corruption, something that has become almost ubiquitous within analyses of the Indian political and bureaucratic system (Gupta 1995; Parry 2000) to the extent some have identified it as a focus that has "inhibited our capacity to better understand the functioning of the Indian state" (Mathur 2017: 1801). The supposed moral neutrality with which Indian citizens view and interpret corrupt practices (Gupta 1995) has become increasingly questioned (Fuller & Benei 2001; Fuller & Harriss 2001; Parry 2000) and is reflective of the debates in Tarakhali.

For women in this village, I will show that the corruption of the state is simultaneously denounced in fiery language whilst being understood as a necessary part of a violent exchange between individuals and the state, in which in order to 'get the work done', bribes, favours and leverage, will be required. It is arguable that they as women, skilled in the art of mediating tension and everyday violence, are thus better suited for interactions with the predatory Indian state than their male Muslim counterparts (Auyero 2012; Pool 2016).

Mathur has recently linked corruption provocatively with its inversion, transparency, suggesting that a widely chronicled South Asian obsession with ‘evidence’ through regimes of paper and documentation (Gupta 2013; Hull 2012) is facilitating the diversion of focus from how local bureaucratic logics are occurring in reality (Mathur 2017). I will build upon such explorations by illustrating that for these women on the margins of the state, forms of paper citizenship were themselves highly desired and considered extremely valuable, as tangible embodiments and visual representations of “being seen” (Street 2014) by the Indian state.

In a significant departure from analyses that explore the desire by marginalised or minority populations to remain beyond the reaches of the state (Scott 1972; 1987; Van Schendel 2005), I will draw significantly on Street’s ethnography of interactions between medical institutions and bureaucracies in Papua New Guinea, in which individuals explicitly sought to “be seen”. The desire by Street’s collaborators for these official and often visual forms of state recognition renders the spaces in which these interactions take place as those “where technological and bureaucratic apparatuses provide opportunities for making persons visible and knowable in new unpredictable ways” (Street 2014: 13).

I will build upon Street’s work by illustrating that the women of Tarakhali represent an arguably more complex case than that of her collaborators, as their desire to “be seen” is multifaceted and shifting (Street 2014). The way in which they are seen is itself something that they wish to influence and direct, willing to perform their poverty for government survey takers before presenting themselves as skilled, eloquent political negotiators or angry and intimidating citizens. In this way they not only seek recognition from the Indian state but seek to control and influence the terms on which it is offered.

### *The Future, Here and Hereafter*

In the final part of this thesis, I will return to the opening vignette of the passing of *nani* Ashima. I began with this ‘critical’ event (Das 1995) of my fieldwork to allow the mediation between a shared, traumatic occurrence within the village with women’s individual lives and perspectives around the future, and the possibilities that for them, death, the afterlife and faith have come to represent. In opening up such spaces of discussion, I will endeavour to offer a much needed perspective on how one group of Muslim women in India at this moment are envisaging and articulating their future, both here on earth, and in the hereafter.

The role of temporality in richly animating the lives and experiences of those who dwell on the margins is something that has become increasingly productively explored (Auyero 2012; Bear 2016;



Han 2012; Harms 2011; 2013; Neilsen 2014). Others have noted across India how challenging it is for those existing in such precarious times and spaces to both imagine and articulate a future within the Indian nation (Bear 2007; Shah 2010; Singh 2016; Krishna 2017). As will become clear, the representations made by women here are deep and complex, invoking “folktales, genealogies and religious tracts, along with imperial and secular chronologies” (Tsing 1993: 260). These richly layered, inclusive narratives weave together pasts, both near and distant, the lives of immediate ancestors and Islamically exemplary ones, and embody the truth that even those with the most challenging existences are nonetheless “story tellers and meaning makers” (Scheper-Hughes 2008: 44) in creative and dynamic ways.

The different kinds of time interspun by women here “fit together awkwardly, challenging one another’s assumptions” (Tsing 1993; 260). In order to accommodate such potentially jarring and conflicted articulations, I will utilise Vigh’s understanding of crisis as context (Vigh 2008). This notion explores how those who dwell in perpetual states of crisis, undergo radical temporal ruptures, struggling to envisage linear, predictable futures in the deeply fluid and unpredictable every day (ibid 2008). Thus “as people struggle to find their bearings and gain possibilities of action, within a terrain over which they have very little control, they imagine the possible unfolding of their social environment and negotiate this in dialogue” (Vigh 2008: 20).

Teasing apart this quote further, I will return once again to the ideas of violences and possibilities, as understood and imagined by women here through their deployment of the “social imaginary” (Vigh 2008: 20). Interpreting this concept as Vigh (2008) understands it, as the way in which women here both observe and comment upon the unfolding of their lives in the present and their potentialities for action, I will illustrate how they use narratives, funeral lamentations, genealogies and the retelling of dreams to heal themselves and others and explore their futures.

Women’s bodies are often inscribed as symbols of collective death and mourning in South Asia (Das 1990; 1995; 2007; Mookherjee 2015a; 2015b) though their everyday understandings and experiences of death are less considered. Within Islam, death too is a gendered space (Abu-Lughod 1993b) as well as one in which differing interpretations of the faith and, as a consequence, funerary practices, collide and come into conflict with one another (Abu-Lughod 1993b; Becker 2009; Haniffa 2008; Janson 2011). A consequence of these differing conceptions amongst diverse groups of Muslims is that those who have considered this issue often specifically adopt an approach that seeks explicitly to contrast normative Islamic principles or practices, with those that individuals actually embody (Ahadour, Van de Branden and Broeckaert 2017). I will avoid any such stance that a-priori assumes a dangerous binary in which certain things are, by default, somehow more ‘Islamic’ than others.

The spectre of judgement after death has been one underscored as significantly animating the thoughts of Muslim women in diverse contexts (Liberatore 2013; Smid 2010) as well as possessing a significance to the founding principles of the Tablighi Jama'at (Robinson 2008). Through exploring how women in Tarakhali revel in their own discussions of punishments after death, I will illustrate how they contrast brutal images of destruction with subtler, yet forceful, statements with respect to when, and by whom, judgement takes place.

I will end with a discussion of dreams, actual and metaphorical. In doing so I will contribute to the accounts of those who have already observed the significance of this rich and creative repository in illuminating imaginations, desires and the explorations of varied and alluring possibilities.

## *Thesis Structure*

In the second chapter of this thesis I explore what it is to be a woman in Tarakhali. Moving through the lives of the women and girls that I came to know intimately, I will paint a picture of the life-cycles of women here, and their socialisation from children to teenagers to wives, mothers and finally, the elderly. I will consider what it is to be a woman in this village, weaving together strands of the qualities or experiences of those who embody or aspire to these traits and those who unintentionally or daringly defy them.

I will suggest that, in essence, being a woman here is to mediate forms of '*tenshun*' and learn to become skilled in the art of navigating forms of everyday violence. Working with what these women themselves define as violence, namely the existence of alternative and preferable possibilities, I will illustrate how the kinds of violence experienced may be physical, structural and intangible, often originating from sources found in the closest proximity. Crucially, I will underscore the productive nature of this violence from which female subjectivities are forged and dynamic possibilities are created.

The five chapters and conclusion that follow can be considered grouped into intricately related pairs, each couplet associated primarily with my central themes: Living Islam in a Time of Uncertainty; The Spaces of Labour and Politics; and, The Future Here and Hereafter.

### *Part Two: Living Islam in a Time of Uncertainty*

In these two chapters I will specifically consider the role that being Muslim plays in shaping these women's existences. In the first of these I will trace the history of Islam here, and the ways in which these women's narratives have been used to spiritually consecrate both livelihoods and the landscape around them. I will claim that these deeply original and locally rooted understandings are increasingly under threat from the reformist principles of the Tablighi Jama'at. I will characterise this as a crisis of authorship, in which women are becoming denied the chance to narrate their own stories and understandings of Muslim beliefs and praxis.

Following from this, the second of these chapters devoted to Islam will consider phenomena perhaps emblematic of this crisis: the increasing number of people 'being caught' by jinn. Through the work of Favret-Saada on witchcraft in the Bocage, I will examine the encounters of those in Tarakhali with these other worldly, Islamic presences, extending her linguistic model in order to illustrate how spaces, times and objects are becoming imbued with an increasingly occult potentiality. In doing so I

will explore how jinn encounters and possessions enable women here to challenge representations of the feminine, embodying and celebrating masculine traits in order to avoid supernatural downfall.

### *Part Three: The Spaces of Labour and Politics*

In the next two chapters, I present two interrelated aspects of female experiences that have undergone radical transformation in the past two decades of increased encompassment and connectivity. Work has always dominated women's lives here, though increasingly it is taking the form of that which is remunerated. Whilst superficially this seems promising, I show that it fails to challenge existing stereotypes and the bonds of gendered domestic labour. In failing to do so, it throws into sharp relief the labour boundary between outside and inside, in which the latter is feminine, devalued and undermined.

However, in contrast, in what follows I will show that women are refashioning the spaces of local bureaucracy and low-level politics as those in which they can 'be seen'. These interactions and entanglements with the state and the political provide not only tangible material benefit for themselves and for their families, but are, I will argue, also representative of a powerful opportunity to be viewed as more than mothers, sisters and wives, but as women. These dual theories of the inside nature of women's work and the state as voyeur will facilitate an examination of the deep, seismic shifts taking place here in terms of space, gender power and politics.

### *Part Four: The Future Here and Hereafter.*

In the last part of this thesis, I will explore how the women of Tarakhali envisage a future, both on earth and in the afterlife. Beginning with the conflicted roles that women play with respect to death, I will explore the gendered nature of death within this village, and the ways in which women use language and narrative to heal the suffering caused by loss.

I will turn to a favoured preoccupation and prominent feature of conversation with my interlocutors: what will happen after death. By portraying a deep and morbid fascination with restless corpses and brutal punishments, contrasted with a reluctance to pronounce judgements themselves, I will argue that the afterlife forms part of a unique Islamic time-scape here where possibility and anticipation is intuitive for these women who on earth have carved out existences dependent upon the skilful navigation of violence. In concluding with their dreams, both for their daughters and for themselves, as well as those that come to them when they are sleeping, I will illustrate that these women desire a deeply creative and Islamic future, one in which they are themselves able to interpret and apply the principles of Islam to their daily lives.

Before I begin, an overview of the Hindu-goddess named village that they call home.

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### iii. The Goddess Village

In a landscape where settlements merge imperceptibly into one another, the village rises gradually from the ebbs of its predecessor alongside the main road. There are the ubiquitous handful of scattered stores flanking the tarmac, low slung concrete buildings often fronted by wooden benches on which patrons seek shade from the harsh glare of the sun and sit, sip *cha* and chat. Devoid of the glamorous glass frontage of some shops in the town nearby, these jumbled troves sell sweets and snacks from large plastic jars displayed with eye-catching prominence, whilst spices, oil, *daal*, soap and *muri* are proffered from their darker interiors. Baskets of potatoes and onions, those cherished Bengali staples, squat in the cool shade of the floor.

There are two tailors spaced out along the strip, offering alterations, hemming and newly made-to-measure garments. There are two butchers, just wooden carts set out by the roadside with lean, unknowable carcasses hanging in the gloom amidst the flies and the heat. There is a barber shop, a beaten-up barber chair in which men can sit languidly for a trim, a shave, or a chat with the assembled bystanders and other patrons who loll around the roadside drinking tea and smoking. There is the permanent, impenetrable card game with an ever-changing cast of players, conducted on the concrete veranda of the internet shop in which a tired computer could offer printouts and copying, if only it were able to be switched on. A circle of five or six men, hemmed by spectators and occasionally eager children, while away the time with multiple rounds and different games. Their calls, for drinks, *paan*, a new set of rules or a change of player, and their lingering cigarette smoke, season the breeze.

The road provides a constant soundtrack: the whirr and honk of scooters and autos, the put-put of 'vans', wooden platforms attached to clapped out motorbikes upon which people cluster under the patchily erected shade, the tired creak of the slower, cycle drawn versions. Bike bells trill, people cajole and mutter as they herd their cows or goats down the road, vast dilapidated buses trundle past and the occasional swish of a too-fast passing car, government, police or tourist. Sometimes the road is quiet, but not often.

The morning calm or an afternoon's heat is punctuated daily by the lilting *azaan* that rises from the large white mosque set back from the road behind two glimmering ponds framed with palm trees. A second, smaller and far more modest mosque is tucked further into the village's interior unseen, though it continues to participate in this daily competition. In spite of its name, that of a wild Hindu goddess revered in this part of India, this is a Muslim village, or rather, a village in which Muslims live and have come to call their own.

As one leaves the roadside on one of the many winding dirt paths that retreat backwards into the green, the sounds change. The ponds that compose so much of the landscape and the lives of those who live here offer a unique pool of sound. The thunk, thunk, thunk of wet clothes as they are slapped against worn stone steps, the scratch and slosh of cooking utensils being cleaned of the remnants of the last meal, and the splash of bathers plunging themselves into the cool, murky green depths, emerging with gasps. Children shriek and bob around in the shallows whilst onlookers brush their teeth and laugh, dappled sunlight gleaming through tree tops dances on the water, illuminating foamy white, tooth-paste spit.

Moving further in, from inside the homesteads, the crackle of open cooking fires sparks the morning air. Huddled figures of women squat low to the ground or rest their haunches on stunted wooden stools, rhythmically moving their arms around the curved vertical blade of the *bonti*, an essential Bengali cooking knife used by women to peel, chop, dice and shred. These daily rituals are all performed close to the earth, the ends of saris used to wipe away sweat. Vegetables are sliced, potatoes peeled and scraped of shreds of skin with the curved iridescence of a mollusc shell akin to that of a mussel. There is the harsh scratch of fish scales cast aside as scraps and the rustle of *chal* as it is sieved, panned like gold of the dirt to become rice.

In the shade of the roof of many of these mud houses, bamboo *dadar* frames languish along open verandas adjacent to which women sit, hunched over in concentration. The frames, composed of two long bamboo poles attached to wooden slats, hold swathes of gaudy fabric stretched tightly onto which jewels are painstakingly sewn or glued in winding patterns marked out by tracing paper and chalk. Low murmurs of chatter pass between women as they work.

As midday melts into afternoon, the laughs of women bathing having completed their morning's work are drawn into a crescendo by the yelps of children returning home for lunch. They are followed by the dignified entrance of the men lucky enough to have returned to eat at home with their wives and children, shutting up their shops or politely absenting themselves from places of work nearby. There will always be rice, a vegetable and normally fish, with dal or meat just once a week, often on a Sunday when those who work in the city may travel home to see their families.

By mid-afternoon, the village is strangely quiet, lulled into a deep post-lunch sleep by the effects of the food and the heat. Only on Sundays is this stupor interrupted as many women file into a long, low building adjacent to the *boro masjid* for the women's *madrassa* prayer meeting where they will sit on woven mats on the concrete floor whilst listening to a lengthy and stern Islamic sermon. Fans are waved lazily before being plucked from the hands of their owners, youngsters fidget and many of the elder, more robust members of those in attendance will unselfconsciously resume their snoozing.

By early evening, the ferocity of the heat and the sun begin to wane. Many men have returned to work, the traffic picks up on the road and children rush down paths, plunge into the ponds or retreat to the fields for games of cricket and football. The evening call to prayer rings out as the sky begins to slip towards orange and pink, people welcome the evening and the coolness with prayers and a cup of tea on the roadside. At dusk most days, the power goes out for several hours, plunging the village into twilight darkness save for the chargeable ‘emergency lights’ and the lambent flames of gas lamps. Some remain indoors, chatting, preparing a simple meal, other sit outside as the stars begin to appear, spread thickly in a glimmering cloak thrown across the sky.

As night blankets the land, children lie on their stomachs doing their homework in the low light of lanterns. Women move as shadows, continuing their sewing work or making a simple dinner of *muri* or some *daal* and *roti*. When there is power, in the most fortunate households families will cluster around the glow of a television screen. In the short winter months, all will go to sleep early, huddling together under scrappy quilts in cheap, scratchy fleeces to ward off the cutting breath of cold night air. In summers, long evenings are spent sitting outside until the wavering heat or exhaustion finally plunges everyone into sleep.

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This is the village I will call Tarakhali. Located in the vast South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, it is a long way from the urban sprawl of the state capital Kolkata that spews out buildings, cars, pollution and people as far as Bariupur. The village lies on one of the many, ever-shifting islands of the mangroves of the Sundarbans. Composed of meandering waterways and largely forested, silty islands, this yawning, largely wild space of 40,000 sq.km. straddles the coast between India and Bangladesh, confounding borders and attempts to either draw or enforce them.

Much has been written about these beautiful forests (Ghosh 2004; Jalais 2010). For the British, they were “deltaic waste-lands” (Baines 1893: 39), treacherous and uninhabited and thus consequently largely ignored. The exception was Daniel Hamilton or ‘Hamilton sahib’ as he is known in this village, who in the first part of the twentieth century sought to establish various cooperative systems aimed at social advancement in nearby Gosaba. Other sources suggest a richer human history here, though a nonetheless challenging existence blighted by extreme weather events, a harsh physical environment and the threat of piracy (Bernier 1891).

To reach Tarakhali, one first must drive or take the local train to Canning, a filthy snarl of a town known for giving its name to a popular Bengali sweet (*Lady Canny chom-chom*), it’s lively prostitution scene and being the so-called gateway to the Sundarbans, as it is described so evocatively



elsewhere (Ghosh 2004; Jalais 2010). Up until 2011, one would at this point have to proceed by boat in order to venture further south. Now, a vast concrete bridge spans the sluggish, grey Matla river, where at high tide small colourful fishing boats and tourist tugs bob along the banks. At low tide when the river becomes just a shallow film, dark silhouettes can be seen picking their way across the riverbed in search of crabs. Alongside the river, large areas of what were formerly paddy fields have been artificially flooded with saline water and now lie flanked by large, muddy banks. In these murky pools, prawn seed collected from deeper in the jungles is deposited and cultivated into prawns in order to meet the fervent hunger of those in Kolkata and more widely (Jalais 2010; Mehta forthcoming).

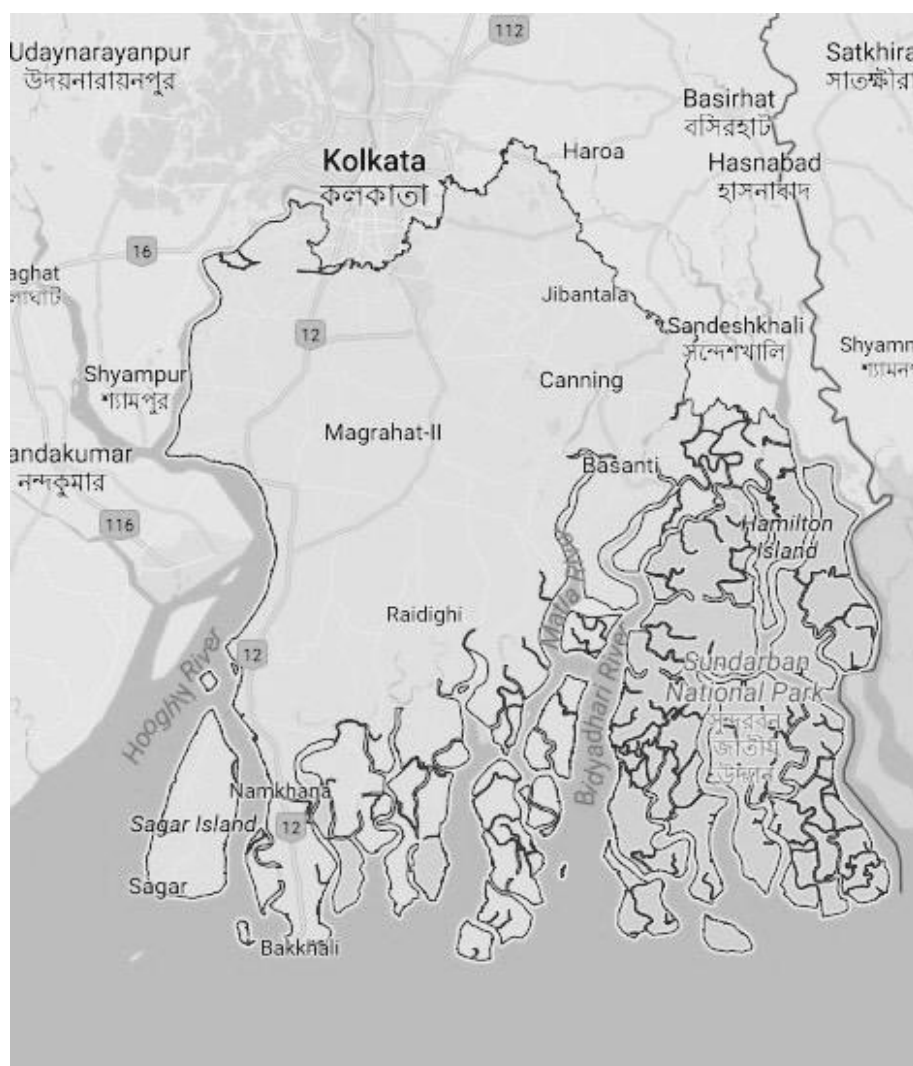


Figure 3: Map of South 24 Parganas

Across this bridge the landscape softens. Banana palms and coconut trees teeter on the edge of the single tarmac road, before giving way to large open paddy fields. Small villages cluster near the roadside, a colourful local market pulses with eager customers jostling in front of languid stall owners who have set out vibrant piles of *kumro*, tomatoes and *beguns* on top of hessian sacks on the concrete floor. There is a slackening of the pace. Cars become less frequent, being replaced by overcrowded auto rickshaw ‘taxis’ that ply the route. Bicycles and cycle carts, herds of animals and occasional large, lumbering local buses bearing tightly packed people meander their way further south, as do the smarter tourist coaches from which faces peer wide-eyed from the windows, though no-one ever gets off.

After about an hour there is another bridge, the only one that exists amidst these islands of the Sundarbans and that which connects the mainland to this first island where Tarakhali is located. Painted in the cheery candy-striped pale blue and white so beloved by Mamata Banerjee, the current West Bengal chief minister, its completion twelve years ago removed the need to cross this river by boat, cutting the journey time significantly. The bridge arches in a steep curve, from the top of which the small houses and Hindu temples of the town of [REDACTED] may be first glimpsed, clustered along the edge of the river. This is the place that lends its name to the surrounding locality and is a bustling town home to about 7,000 people (Indian Census 2011).

[REDACTED] is one of the oldest islands of the Sundarbans, stable and less shifting than those to the South but not yet attached to the mainland. This formerly “down” island has, in the past two decades, shed its jungle origins and moved decidedly ‘up’ (Jalais 2010). It now represents an edge or a cusp, up towards the civility and modernity of Canning, Bariupur and Kolkata or down towards the Sundarbans proper. It is a place that “feels criss-crossed by different lines of communication projecting in different directions” (Jalais 2010: 21) whose position nonetheless “allows one to imagine an illegal but possible voyage via the banned core forest towards the south, beyond the deep dark mangroves, until one would leave the grey and brown rivers of the forest and reach the vast expanse of the bottomless blue of the Bay of Bengal” (Jalais 2010: 22).

The town is centred around two parallel streets thickly congested with traffic and shops. There are several bank branches, a central market place, the local *onchol* office, and a police station and hospital on the road leading out of town. Boasting the occasional glass shop front, a photography studio and what could, generously, be referred to as a restaurant, the town offers a final, small gasp of some of the luxuries slow to trickle down to these parts before the single tarmac road winds further away towards the Sundarbans.

Some 2 km further down this road is Tarakhali. It is a large, sprawling village of around 4,200 people, composed of some 850 households (Indian Census 2011). There is an almost even split between men

and women in the village, with the latter fractionally outnumbering the former at a rate of 1050:1000 (Indian Census 2011). Literacy stands at 65%, lower than the West Bengal state wide average of 76.26%, a fact not unusual in a Muslim community. It is particularly low in the case of women for whom here it is only 61.52% (Indian Census 2011), indicative of generations where marriage, childbirth and the associated responsibilities took place at an early age.

Everyone in Tarakhali speaks Bengali, in sharp contrast to the claims of those on the Hindu nationalist end of the political spectrum who often construe Muslims as avoiding national or state languages in favour of Islamic mother tongues. Many here also speak Hindi, particularly those who have ventured beyond the confines of this district and spent time in Kolkata or elsewhere, where its use is more pervasive. For the younger generation, Hindi is the language of pop songs and Bollywood movies, and is thus widely understood, even if it can't be spoken or written.

Many of the elder village inhabitants here also speak Urdu learned from ancestors from Kolkata, relics of a time when this beautiful, lilting lyrical language was more commonplace across India. Those with a *madrassa* education may also know Urdu, as well as some Arabic. Many hold snippets of Arabic phrases they have absorbed from the *Quran*, or sermons in the *masjid* or the women's *madrassa*, which they recite proudly and expectantly only to be disappointed by my linguistic ignorance, particularly as someone who professes to have come to this village to learn about Islam. Many can recite verses of the *Quran*, and even read the language, without understanding what it means, though nonetheless deriving a great, soothing benefit from the murmured recitation of verses.

Village-specific religious data is yet to be released from the most recent Indian census. However, aside from a handful of Hindu families who live on the fringes of Tarakhali, technically part of this village but with life worlds predominantly located in others next door, this is an entirely Muslim village. This was not always the case. The village itself takes its name from a Hindu goddess of fervent intensity to whom there once stood a small temple that would be visited by those making their way to and from the forests of the Sundarbans. This was demolished many years ago, once the majority of Hindu families had left the village, in order to make way for the current primary school.

Initially this homogeneity was striking, particularly in the light of glimpses of a more intermingled religious past (Jalais 2010), the remains of which have been demolished and built upon in a reclamation of public space commonplace in India (Hayden 2002; Van de Veer 1994). Over time I began to understand why Hindu families would have moved 'up' (Jalais 2010) to the town and surrounding areas, firstly as a result of their increased financial stability and affluence but also for practical purposes. Proximity to other Hindu families and their places of worship conjoined with

distance from the two butcher's carts and free roaming livestock that proliferate here in Tarakhali, as in Muslim villages elsewhere, understandably offer more comfortable modes of existence.

There are three mosques in Tarakhali, a seemingly large number for such a relatively small community. One is far out on the edges of the village where it merges into another, some 45 minutes by foot away from the main road and one that though I was aware of, I spent little time near. The other two are in the heart of the village, a mere 100m walk from one another, thus engaging in a daily contest of the volume and melodiousness of their call to prayer. In addition, there is a *madrasa* school situated in between the two and serving both congregations, as well as families from outside the village as is typically the way these institutions operate. During the 16 months I was in the village, construction began on a women and girls' *madrasa*, to provide separate education and boarding facilities for girls and a space for the weekly women's sermon, which currently occurs in a long, low slung building adjacent to the larger of the two mosques.

Elsewhere in West Bengal, caste amongst Muslims has been illustrated to be a feature of social organisation (Banerjee 2008) as it has amongst non-Muslims across the state more widely (Chandra, Heierstad and Bo Nielsen 2016). Yet in Tarakhali, caste does not play a typical role. As it does not stratify village life or relationships, it was something which was never discussed, and in no organised way facilitated or constrained action, employment, marriage or status as is so often the case elsewhere in India (Fuller 1996; Still 2013; 2014). Further, although the relationship between Scheduled Caste (SC) status and being Muslim remains unclear in India, 399 village inhabitants, or less than a tenth, were identified in the most recent census as of SC status. It is likely that this is the result of conversion to Islam by formerly Hindu Dalits, who now retain SC Status by virtue of surname, and given the extreme poverty and Below the Poverty Line status of the vast majority here, did not single them out in any significant or stratifying way.

The words caste or *jat* are however used to refer to two crucial things here - one's family and one's religion. A murky history of Adivasi or low caste Hindu conversion is prevalent in connection with Muslims in this part of India and is perhaps embodied by the handful of surnames used in the village. A set of only nine names, adopted and worn as though not quite fitting - Khan, Loskor, Sheikh, Saddar, Halder, Mondol, Gazi, Mollah, and Poylang. The village is thus composed of large family units, intertwined by blood and bound by close proximity and networks of obligation. One's caste as Loskor then, may not affect one's job or status, though it will determine who one lives alongside, shares land and resources with, and is obliged to assist in times of difficulty.

For outsiders to the village, caste is used when talking and asking questions about religion. People would frequently ask me of my caste and be at once horrified and fascinated to learn that I was '*nastik*', or an atheist. In this way, caste is used here to signify a religion and community in a way also

observed amongst Hindu and Anglo-Indian communities within West Bengal (Bear 1997a), though unlike Hindu populations my Muslim collaborators were unable to index their faith or *jati* somehow to a national identity. When travelling outside of the village it was men who significantly encountered discrimination on the basis of *jati*, though as will be discussed further in Chapter 6, this was so overwhelmingly determined by their religious, community identity, that the question of caste seemed almost irrelevant.

Of the adult population, only 54% are employed here. Of these, a mere 51% are what is classed as 'main workers' by the census, as opposed to their 'marginal worker' counterparts. This implies some sort of fixed and regular aspect to their employment, though it includes those working as cultivators (17.5%) and agricultural labourers (19%) who are engaged in an undeniably precarious form of labour subject to drastic seasonal variations, and also those in the similarly insecure household industries (18%). Even including these groups, the statistics show that only about 25% of the village inhabitants are employed in what could loosely be considered regular, formalised labour. There is a further striking statistic about labour in the village, which is that in 2001, a mere 125 women in the village were working. In the ten years between the two censuses, this has jumped to 652, a fivefold increase far out-stripping the 1.18% population increase (Indian Census 2011). This is a dramatic shift with rippling consequences, that will be explored further in later chapters.

The one tarmac road in the village slices cleanly through it, leading north west towards the town, and south east towards the Sundarbans. Running off each side are uneven brick or simple mud paths that wind back into the village interior. No one in Tarakhali has a car, though a handful of people have scooters. This includes the *imam* of the smaller, *choto masjid*, who proudly rides around astride his shining blue scooter, long white *kurta* billowing. Many households have a bicycle which is shared, used by children and men to get to school or work. The rest are reliant on the clapped-out cycle rickshaw carts that trundle up and down the road to the town, or the slightly speedier 'vans' consisting of a wooden platform attached to an auto rickshaw at the front.

As is so often the case across parts of rural India, there is no running water in this village. A couple of government installed water hand pumps dot the roadside, complemented with what I'm told are repeated promises for more to be built that are yet to materialise. Large queues snake around them in the morning, with small children too young to bathe in the ponds held next to buckets and doused, shrieking, by their mothers, women standing with multiple bottles and containers to fill and the more refined of the village's inhabitants waiting to brush their teeth in the clear, intermittent water. For the vast majority, the many grey green ponds will suffice for all of these needs, plunging into the cool depths to clean or crouching on their banks to clean cooking utensils and fill water bottles.

A widely publicised bathroom scheme in which a modest contribution from an individual will result in the government building an outhouse long drop toilet adjacent to their property is widely discussed, highly coveted and, perhaps inevitably, a site of deep political corruption. Nonetheless a number of these small outhouses dot the landscape, standing by the better-off homes where they are often shared with less fortunate neighbouring households for a small fee or less tangible debt or favour. The remainder of the village will go outdoors, creeping into the patches of jungle or into the fields at night or early in the morning.

Electricity arrived in Tarakhali nine years ago, shortly after the construction of the bridge. It remains, however, intermittent, often shutting off at some point during the morning and again in the early afternoon. It is almost always absent here as dusk arrives, between around five or six in the evening and stays off until about eight or nine o'clock at night. This added a gentle and intimate character to the ends of my long days of fieldwork, spending them in cooler months huddled around a single gas lamp, watching the faces of my collaborators in the shadows, or when it is hot sitting outside on plastic chairs looking for fireflies and the stars.



Figure 4: A home

Almost all of the homesteads here are *kacca* houses. This means they are primarily composed of organic materials including mud, clay, wood, palm fronds and cow dung. A large foundation at least half a metre from the ground is made by combining these elements together with water into a thick paste that dries out with the heat and the sun. The walls are similarly constructed, with small spaces hollowed out for windows. Around the edges of the veranda, woven bamboo or wooden poles or slats are used to create enclosures that though shielded, nonetheless retain an openness allowing the breeze to enter. Roofs of woven palm fronds or undulating sheets of metal are balanced on wooden frames that are attached to the walls. Small upgrades such as tiled steps are constantly being added, particularly after the monsoon has receded and repairs to these structures take centre stage for several weeks before the winter sets in.

The homes themselves are rich archives of bedraggled and tattered possessions, nonetheless prized in spite of this. Most are composed of one or two interior rooms, and a long, covered veranda. Whilst cooking, washing and normally, eating, are always done outside, the inner rooms are used for sleeping, storage and leisure activities. Large raised wooden cots dominate the spaces, on which lie stained, sandwich thin mattresses. Underneath sit rusted iron trunks crammed with clothes or papers, cooking utensils, shoes, plastic chairs, sacks of potatoes or rice and winter blankets. In some are large cupboards or display cabinets into which are stuffed mismatched china plates and cups, ornaments, valuable documents in plastic sleeves, prayer mats carefully folded and enshrouded copies of the *Quran*.

There are just a handful of *pukka* houses in Tarakhali, those constructed with concrete, bricks or other man-made building materials. These structures seem almost incongruous here, where all other homesteads are camouflaged in the greys and greens of the verdant landscape. Often half built, all of those who live in these more comfortable homes are from families with government jobs at their heart, in an unmistakable demonstration of the benefits provided by proximity to power. Lacking the ubiquitous verandas of the *kacca* houses, these single-story homes share similarly unglazed windows and the assortment of furniture as the others, though with additional luxuries such as sofas and refrigerators.

Despite any differences in houses or material possessions, the hugely entwined and overlapping existences of those living in Tarakhali is extremely significant. The cheek-by-jowl nature of houses here and the active gossip mill that turns to churn out facts and rumours with equal velocity, mean that one's triumphs, failures, conflicts and secrets are likely to be known by all. There are no doors to houses, no need to ask permission to visit and no obligation to ask before entering. Your business is everyone's business, and the network of obligations one has to one's neighbours is dense and unimaginable in an urban, Western context.

This significance of the village here as a unit of existence is underscored by the openness with which women move around without engaging in any form of veiling. With this form of modesty reserved for strangers, and those not belonging to one's family, those living within Tarakhali are at least metaphorically part of the fabric of one's family. This is a place, a landscape that those living in feel a deep and stirring attachment to, which animates their stories, their lives and their imagined futures. This deep connectivity should be used to underscore a point about the framing of what follows. Although this is a thesis about women's lives, it is of course about men's lives too. Whilst I have privileged the biographies and experiences of my female collaborators, specifically attempting to explore how they as Muslim women live at this present moment in rural India, the same aspects of men within their life worlds are inevitably entangled and implicated within such understandings. I will elaborate further on this in a brief methodology section.

### *Methodology*

I began my fieldwork in the village of Tarakhali in April 2015. Days earlier, I had met my driver Suraj Da for the first time, portly, jocular and moustachioed, his love of Hindi cinema only matched by his passion for food. I had also been introduced to my research assistant Kishore, a softly spoken man in his mid-twenties from a village near Sonarkhali with experience of conducting government surveys though, it quickly transpired, not a very strong grasp of English, making the Bengali I had been learning first in Streatham and subsequently in Santiniketan, not just desirable, but crucial. Both men, both Hindu, they seemed perhaps unlikely companions with which to begin conducting research on Muslim women's lives, though they would soon prove to be my two most valuable acquaintances.

I had been introduced to them through a friend of my landlord's daughter in Kolkata, in the kind of fortunate, by-chance and ultimately hugely significant encounter that can render the experience of fieldwork slightly magical. Her father, an esteemed doctor in the city, had run health camps all around that part of South 24 Parganas, and she consequently knew both a driver in Kolkata familiar with the area and a potential research assistant in Sonarkhali with whom she could put me in touch. Happily, this arrangement reflected my firm desire to avoid becoming affiliated in any way with a local NGO or other organisation working in the surrounding area, determined to try and frame my encounters with people as neutrally as possible.

Having driven lurchingly down the pot-holed roads to all of the Muslim villages on the island of [REDACTED], I had finally, possibly arbitrarily, chosen Tarakhali. I was intrigued by the name, that perhaps spoke of a deeper, intermingled religious past of this corner of West Bengal (Jalais 2010) as



well as drawn by the large, *pukka masjid* easily seen from the roadside that seemed to whisper of interesting, Islamic connections.

Over that unbearably hot first summer, I continued to visit the village around three or four days each week, making the three-and-a-half-hour drive from Kolkata with Suraj Da at sunrise before returning in the mid-afternoon heat in order to arrive home by nightfall, by which time he told me that bandits would be on the road as this was a dangerous area. Suraj's assertions were nothing compared to the horror expressed by middle and upper-class Bengalis in Kolkata about my intentions. Their supposed refinement and education did not stop them from describing a Muslim village in the area as a *nungra* (dirty), *jungli* (jungle-like or backward) kind of place where my safety would be extremely compromised (despite the fact that none of them had, predictably, ever been this far south of the city).

Such warnings only served to reinforce the continual stigmatisation and marginalisation of such spaces and peoples in the eyes of Bengali *bhdrolok*<sup>4</sup> society underscored so effectively in other accounts of this area, in which one's social worth is measured by how far 'up' one is towards Kolkata (Jalais 2005; 2010). They also hardened my determination to find somewhere to live in the vicinity, and by the end of August, I had found a small flat on the edge of [REDACTED] town from which it became a short five minute ride on the back of Kishore's scooter to the village, where I remained until I finished my fieldwork in July 2016.

I commenced my explorations of Tarakhali in a deliberately relaxed and flexible fashion, visiting houses one by one in no particular order and where possible, having a conversation with those present. If people stopped me and wanted to talk, I engaged eagerly, if people didn't want to speak to me, I entirely understood. I was then far from the point later in fieldwork where people and their narratives somehow distressingly become 'data' and gaps within such analyses have to be filled.

It was on the third day of fieldwork that I first met Aliya. We had approached her home from behind, winding our way down the hard sun-baked paths that lead from the village interior. She had been cool towards me at first, weary in delivering her brusque answers to my falteringly delivered questions. She showed signs of softening when, on discovering I liked mangoes, she rose and plucked a green *tok* (sour) one from her tree, slicing it quickly on a *bonti*, before sprinkling it with salt and passing it to me to eat with a spoonful of heady, contrastingly sweet mango chutney. It was the most extraordinary thing I think I have ever tasted. This was followed by a conversation in which she

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<sup>4</sup> Bengali term originally signifying a landlord or rentier class status, it has come to possess connotations of Hindu, upper-class and caste and education.

revealed her brilliant capacity for silliness, erupting into fits of infectious giggles every time she asked me what the English word was for “chutney” and I responded, “chutney”.

I continued in this relaxed fashion for many months, gradually visiting more and more homes in the village and incrementally building up my knowledge of the place and the people there.

I drew pencil maps, identifying key locations and the different homes of notable interlocutors. I made sketches of homes and their interiors, anxious not to forget the things I was seeing. I took photographs, made audio recordings and wrote pages and pages of fieldnotes. I attempted to trace the history of the village, learning eventually it was named after a Hindu goddess and possessed a magical tree from which blood would flow should its trunk ever be cut. The Loskor tea shop soon became a regular part of my daily itinerary, stopping in the shade for a cup of steaming *cha* and a chat with the family to whom I was becoming increasingly close. It was sitting there one morning that I heard English for the first time in the village, in the form of a reasonable conjunction of questions: “How are you? Who are you?” turning around to see Sara, a dark brown shawl thrown elegantly over her shoulder, to ward off the morning chill.

Over time I began to develop my regular conversation partners: Kaki, Nura, Aliya, Sara and the Loskors. It had become quickly apparent in those first few months that my focus was going to be on the lives of women in the village. This was as the result of my own gender making such conversations much less socially delicate, my desire to foreground the Muslim women’s lives that are so often overlooked, and for the practical reason that by remaining within the village for the majority of the time, it was typically women who would be found within the homesteads.

The women here were fascinated, impressed and appalled in equal measure by my presence. Their questions as to what I was actually doing, why my family were letting me do this, or who was looking after my husband, enabled me gradually to begin to explore those key relationships in their lives, our contrasting experiences and surprising similarities, allowing over time for the easy exchange of information. To most in the village, at first, I was *bideshi meye* or *mohila* or foreign girl or woman. I forbade the use of *mem sahib* from anyone, particularly children, though as ‘Lexi’ is not particularly easy to say in Bengali, I was very often Lakshmi, or some strange amalgamation of the two such as Lakshi, or Laxi. Khozana almost instantly proclaimed herself my aunt, or *kaki*, and I thus became *mashi* or “aunty” to her grandchildren Shamsia, Sirana and Shafuz. For Reenu I was always *didi*.

With respect to what I was actually doing there, though studying and research were vaguely familiar concepts, the introduction of PhD, doctorate and anthropology usually proved hopelessly confounding, and besides, was I not far too old for that? Writing a book became the way they

understood my purpose and explained it themselves haughtily to any visiting family members or other outsiders who happened to catch me sitting with them deep in conversation.

Reflecting my female theoretical focus, from August 2015 I began to regularly attend microfinance meetings in the village every Wednesday and Saturday morning, and those of the female *madrassa* meeting on Sunday afternoons, as the key events that punctuated women's weeks in the village. I became attuned to their temporal rhythms, able to discern the patterns of their days and know the times I would have the best chance of securing a conversation. I learnt, badly, how to do the *dadar kaj* sewing work that consumed so much of their time. I visited the other locations that composed their lived worlds, the bazaar, the government offices and police stations, and the microfinance regional offices they would have been required to visit in order to first take out a loan. I visited every shop along the Tarakhali roadside, in order to understand exactly what kinds of goods and services they could access without having to leave the village.

Though I spent the majority of my time with women, I nonetheless spoke to and spent time with men almost every single day of my fieldwork. This included interviewing the *imams* of both *masjids* on multiple occasions, visiting the *madrassa* teachers and the boys' *madrassa* school and speaking to the *qazi* and his son who are the arbitrators of Muslim Personal Law<sup>5</sup> in the village. I also spoke to and spent time with men who were school teachers, private tutors, shop owners, tailors, builders, a doctor, a police officer, an Islamic healer as well as the sons, brothers, husbands, fathers-in-law and brothers-in-laws of my collaborators, who ranged in ages from as young as two to as old as 85 years old.

By January 2016 had visited over 100 households in Tarakhali. I devoted the remaining months of my fieldwork to learning as much as I could about the lives of women, consistently speaking to key interlocutors as well as others, often making recordings of their aural histories. I managed to eventually arrange three separate focus groups of women in which we specifically discussed the future over the course of three afternoons, which given the relaxed and indifferent nature of timekeeping in the village, felt nothing short of miraculous. I conducted extended, structured interviews with twelve key collaborators and I observed the way women spoke as well as acted in the run up to the May 2016 election. It was around this time that I became aware of the *jinn* dwelling in the village, who would go on to catch two of my collaborators, thus forcefully inserting themselves into my research.

All this time I had become closer and closer to five families, my days and experiences becoming more entwined with theirs. Within this group my individual relationships were entirely different and distinct, and I began to recognise the totally unique nature of each woman's contributions to the

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<sup>5</sup> The form of Islamic law that runs alongside Indian Constitutional Law.

broader picture of female worlds here that I was building: Nura's fantastical stories; Tabina's political commentary; Aliya's measured insights; Sara's unusual perspectives; and, Kaki's deep connections to the land around us. Within these five families I was present for several *dekha sonas*<sup>6</sup>, a wedding, two deaths, two people becoming caught by *jinn* and a birth.

Such closeness, inevitably perhaps, brought challenges. When it became clear to whom in Tarakhali I was devoting the majority of my time, I began to be reprimanded by others for not making regular enough visits to their households or was rebuked jealously for spending my days elsewhere. I became drawn into a deep feud between the Loskor family and that of Sara on the other side of the road, that, though never publicly articulated, was privately confided and talked about by both sides. I learnt things about people that I was close with that became deeply troubling to me: that Khozana was a brutal and unforgiving mother-in-law to Farhaza; or that Rojida had secretly been married at least twice before, and that no one had told me. All the while, there was the unspoken truth that I knew perhaps better than any of my closest collaborators, that one day I would leave the village and might never come back.

I was last in Tarakhali for Eid in July 2016, though remained in India until the end of that year. During this time, whilst my Indian mobile number was still active, I continued to receive calls from Reenu, Sara and sometimes Kaki, each beginning slightly differently but ending the same way "*didi... Lexi.... meye!...kokhon tumi abar asbo?*" [when are you coming again?]. I have still not been able to answer them.

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I will now begin by asking a question I encountered repeatedly during my time in the village: What is it like to be a woman in Tarakhali?

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<sup>6</sup> The meetings between a bride and groom's family that precedes an engagement here.

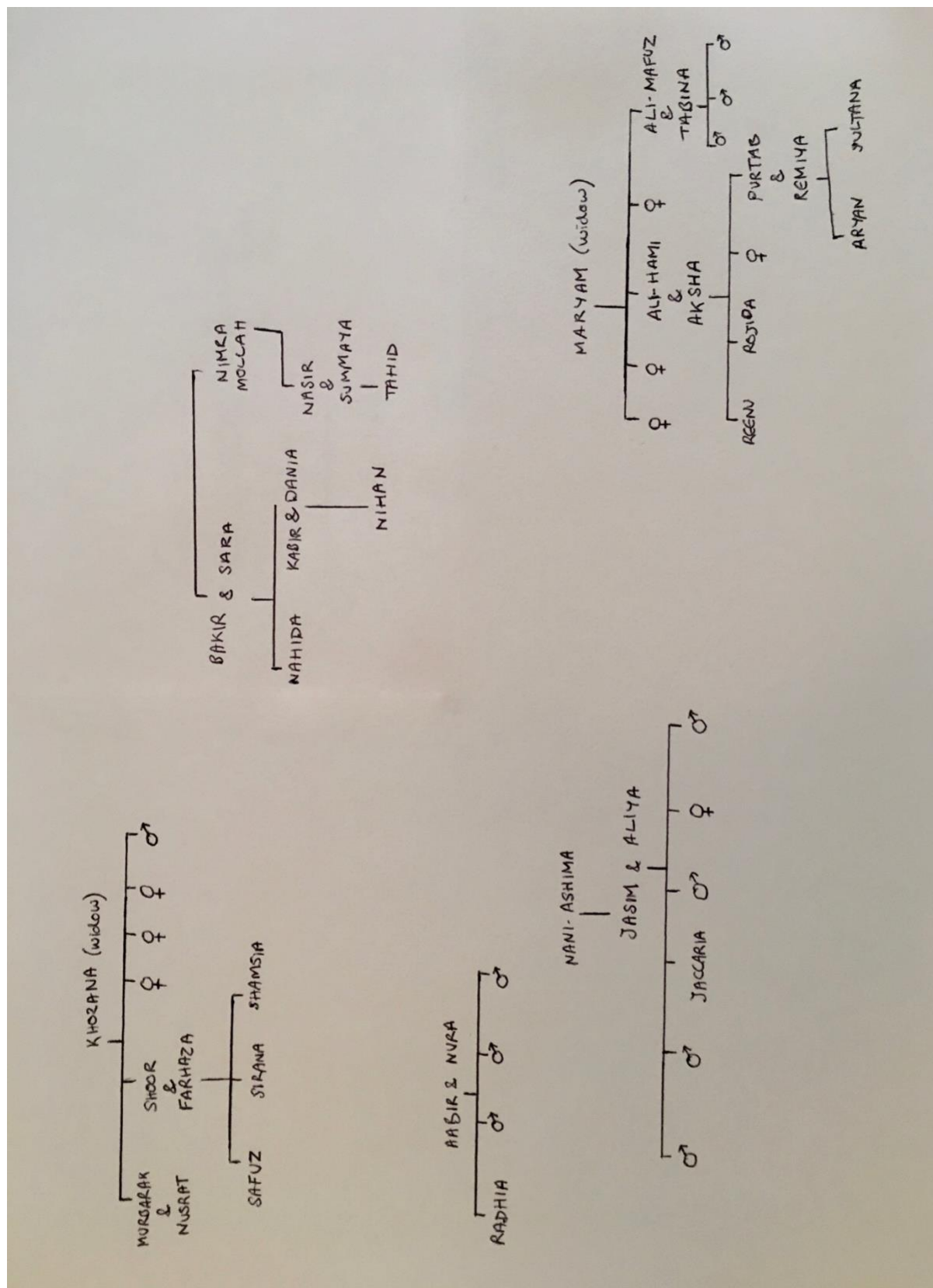


Figure 5: Family trees

## Chapter Two – Violence and Possibility

Much is said of what women's lives should be in Tarakhali. In the choking afternoon heat of the low-slung mud building used to accommodate the women's *madrasa* meeting that takes place each Sunday, a rotating cast of invisible male presences take turns to describe female lives in instructive tones from behind a bamboo screen. As the women sit, clustered in groups, lazily fanning themselves and one another, they listen as they are told yet again that a woman's life is a path upon which she must struggle to walk straight at all times, with *pap* or sin lying waiting at either side. Every, single, footstep, represents a risk.

At home, a woman's life is work, *kaj*, so much so as to be the all-encompassing definition offered by them to describe the time spent from those waking moments in the lingering mist of dawn to the precious, quiet minutes at night when that day's tasks have finally been completed and children and husbands are sleeping. Sweeping, cooking, feeding, washing, dressing, cleaning, cooking, washing, feeding, sewing, cooking, cleaning in an ongoing and repetitive cycle that only slackens and softens as their bodies do with age, and if they are lucky, with the long-awaited arrival of daughters-in-law to assume some of the burden.

Within the enveloping though intangible realms of kinship and the future, a woman's life is said to be her children, and more specifically, her sons. "amader bhubishot chelera!" [Boys are our futures!] women would intone loudly, mildly irritated that the significance of having given birth to males had not been adequately acknowledged. In other homes where daughters were in a preponderance, lives and futures seemed less certain. "meyer jibon khub dami..." [girls' lives are very expensive...] was often muttered in conversations around the dominant and widely vocalised preference for male heirs. With the spectre of exorbitant dowry payments and frittered-out existences alone hanging over sonless families, daughter's lives could also taint the lives of others.

Though much is said of what women's lives are here, little is said of what it is like to be a woman. This is despite the fact that from that first moment (Grima 1992: 50), from the sharp intake of breath when a in a hot, dark room, amidst the moans, the blood and the sweat, a baby is born, and the question hangs in the air "chele na meye?" [boy or girl?] the answer will entail two entirely different modes of existence.

In this chapter I will move through the lives of the women and girls that became my most important collaborators. Tracing the flows and paths of their lives, I will chart how women here progress from girlhood to awkward teenagers, to wifehood, to motherhood and to old age, each temporal stage with its varying challenges and responsibilities. These women's own experiences and expectations, and

their beliefs and opinions about one another, will be drawn together to construct a deeply localised understanding of female personhood and what it is to be a woman.

I will suggest that to be a woman in Tarakhali is in its essence to navigate '*tenshun*' and contradiction and contend with different forms of everyday violence. These are violences that are entailed here by being female and may also be intertwined at times with these women's occupation of religious, geographic, monetary, political, social and temporal peripheries. These localised instantiations, I argue, are reflective of a wider undercurrent of violence that permeates and inflects Indian society more generally.

This is not to reproduce the tired image of the suffering and oppressed Muslim, subaltern female as has been necessarily problematised and critiqued (Abu-Lughod 2002; Mohanty 1988; 2012; Spivak 1994). Rather, it is a move towards analytical honesty in attempting to acknowledge these women's understandings and representations of their own lives, whilst also taking seriously the strength, bravery and dynamism with which they navigate them.

To this end, I will place into conversation the kinds of over-arching violence that to outsiders may be defined as such, with what women here themselves explicitly identify as unacceptable forms of everyday violence. What emerges is a nuanced picture of violence as the existence of possibility: where there is violence there is another, alternative course of action that has not been taken. This produces a definition of violence as something potentially productive, generating strengths and possibilities in those for whom it is an inevitable yet by no means insurmountable obstacle.

There are some crucial theses that underpin these assertions.

Women's lives here are experienced by them as divided by a temporally and experientially sharp and violent break. This occurs between unmarried childhood in the home of their families, and married adulthood in the home of others. Parental death or abandonment in infancy can drive this fissure further into the soft folds of youth.

A woman's life will involve the navigation of unpredictable and uncontrollable forms of violence. These may be physical and what we would in the West define as domestic violence, at the hands of husbands, parents-in-law, sons or others. They may also be structural (Gupta 2012; Scheper-Hughes 1992), symbolic and generated by the state (Han 2012) in the forms that an occupation of a multitude of peripheries arguably necessitates (Jalais 2005; Singh 2016). A failure to skilfully and effectively manage these kinds of violence may result in its manifestation in further non-physical form - that of rumour, gossip and stigmatisation.

Violences experienced by men here are distinct for three fundamental reasons: they do not suffer the temporal break in their biographies; the violence is typically externally located as opposed to generated in the interior; and, they can and do respond with violence of their own.

Using the life story of Aliya, I will tease apart how varying forms of violence and possibility can entwine to produce truly extraordinary circumstances, yet how one woman can skilfully navigate these challenges. I will contrast this with those who struggle - Sara, Khozana - who may yet pick themselves up and deftly conceal their stumbles, or those like Aksha whose reputations lie in the dust on the roadside.

In the chapters that follow I explore in greater detail how other areas of these women's lives shape their female personhood and serve as sites of violence and possibility of their own. In the following two chapters I will specifically consider the role of Islam in both strengthening them and providing comfort, juxtaposing this with how the dual, distinct presences of reformist and supernatural Islamic forces are causing increasing doubt and uncertainty. Labour, engagement with politics and bureaucracy and understandings of the future will also be shown as crucial sites in the production of women here.

I now begin with the navigation of violence, and ask, why violence at all?

### *A Return to Violence*

*"In repeatedly trying to write the meaning(s) of violence against women in Indian society, I find that languages of pain through which social sciences could gaze at, touch or become textual bodies on which this pain is written often elude me" (Das 1996: 67).*

South of Tarakhali, further into the Sundarbans, people live in fear of being eaten by tigers. Those working deep in the forests or the meandering rivers that compose this fluid landscape dread encounters with these regal, state-protected predators, whose safety and survival, they believe, has become understood as more valuable than theirs (Jalais 2005; 2010; Mehta forthcoming). According to villagers, this was not always the way (Jalais 2005) though after the events on the island of Morichjhanpi<sup>7</sup> in 1979, in which an unknown number of East Bengali refugees and local villagers

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<sup>7</sup> In 1979 the newly elected Left Front government in West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Hindu refugees from this island in the Sundarbans. Hundreds are thought to have died from starvation, disease and police and state brutality. See Ghosh 2004; Jalais 2005.



died of starvation, dehydration, disease, or police bullets, “annoyed at the disturbances caused by the unleashed violence” (Jalais 2005: 1761), the tigers have turned.

Within Tarakhali, similar echoes of decades of violence murmur and reverberate here as they do elsewhere across India, in a faint though repeated iteration of disturbing possibility. The village itself came to be in part from violence, the brutal aftershocks of India’s partition along shakily drawn religious lines sending Muslims, suddenly on the wrong side of the Bengal borderline, away from the cities and further into the jungle (Chatterji 1995; 2007). The violent contractions of the Bangladesh Liberation War, pushed a desperate surge of people back across the dividing line. The hands of ancestors of those such as Khozana, who ‘cut’ the land, the tree trunks, the branches, the grasses and the throats of animals to build a settlement in this formerly remote, and thus understood as better protected, place.

Violence here is not confined to memory but is something continually negotiated in relation to ‘critical events’ (Das 1995) in lives lived in this locality. The cyclone of Aila in 2009 that caused significant damage and loss of life across the region, had yet again emphasised the indifference of both the state and society generally to the plights of those in poverty dwelling along the margins: “Aila somoy kichu dai ni” [In the time of Aila, they gave us nothing]. A famine similarly stalked the recollections of my older interlocutors such as Maryam, in which many in the village had died as a scant handful of rice became for many months the single meal consumed each day.

As Muslims, there were other threatening occurrences and possibilities. The rise of right-wing Hindu vigilantism across India, in which a national BJP government has stepped back to allow a “devolution of power and outsourcing of cultural policing” (Jaffrelot 2017), had made its presence known in Tarakhali. Aliya’s son had his head split open by a group of RSS youths<sup>8</sup> whilst I was in the village and those working as butchers had their stalls targeted with painted slogans and spoken threats. These were understood not as absences, but presences, “not a mark of weakness or inadequacy but a sign of the strength” (Sarkar 2002: 2872-2873) of these Hindutva ideological fissures making cracks in communities and lives.

Across India there exists this constant possibility of violence. It is something that has been woven into the social fabric with threads of patriarchy, nationalism, colonialism, honour, terrorism, caste and religion. There exists a delicate dance between wider, extreme moments of its manifestation and myriad everyday lives. Those who have explored collective violence in South Asia have underscored

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<sup>8</sup> The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a militant, right wing Hindu organisation regarded as intimately linked with the BJP Party currently led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and often implicated in outbreaks of communal violence in India. See Blom-Hansen 1996.

that the role it plays within society is not confined to critical moments or events (Brass 1997; Das 1995; 2007; Spencer 2004) rather it is something that may be traced into the everyday through a “kind of mapping of the different moral and aesthetic evaluations people in different contexts make of their actions on the bodies of others” (Spencer 2004: 473).

In the public sphere, violence here is associated with the fractious fault lines of religious communalism (Brass 1997; 2003; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012), Hindu nationalism (Blom-Hansen 1999; 2001), Maoist insurgency (Shah 2010), and even moral sensibility (Jaffrelot 2017). The history and politics of this region are charged with violent protests, riots, pogroms, skirmishes and massacres. Familiar and repetitive images abound, those of screaming crowds waving flags or banners, the skeletons of charred vehicles left smouldering and abandoned after rioters have dispersed, or the desperate faces of the blood-soaked, dirt streaked, begging for their lives.

These images are but one kind of instantiation, belying both the interconnectedness and the ordinariness of violent political occurrences and encounters as experienced by the majority in India (Brass 1997; Spencer 2004). Others have highlighted that whilst out-of-the-ordinary flashes of political violence may capture the media-fuelled national imagination, many other unseen or overlooked moments occur in the startling “high incidence of the violence in everyday encounters with the state in much of rural South Asia” (Spencer 2004: 479) (Brass 1997; Spencer 2007). Such occurrences forcibly engender the re-framing of relationships, in which the formerly caring or benevolent state is necessarily reinterpreted as an unconcerned or disinterested bystander (Brass 2003; Jalais 2005).

In Tarakhali, such relationships have too become questioned. The brutal nature of politics in West Bengal is something remarkably pronounced in spite of an erudite and rich intellectual political culture (Banerjee 2008; Chatterji 1995; 2007; Jalais 2005). Political violence is regarded as a significant legacy of 34 years of Left Front rule, which finally came to an end in 2011 with the election of the Trinamool Congress Party (TMC), though it is one that the current administration has only embraced and advanced. Riots, shootings and bomb blasts are normalised and expected in times of political campaigns and elections in the state.

In January this year, a ten-year-old boy was shot and killed, having been caught in the crossfire of a political turf war in [REDACTED], the small local town which lies just ten minutes away from this village. Many of my female collaborators’ stories from childhood were of incidents of such political violence, of uncles, or grandfathers caught on the wrong side of a political binary being hacked to death in fields of rice, or so badly beaten they struggled to ever use their limbs again. There is the

lingering sense in these recollections through their use of familiar idioms and images, that generalisation and metaphor may be understandably easier to articulate (Das 2007; Dasgupta 2015).

Violence is not confined to groups nor only to prominent social and political issues (Brass 1997; 2003; Chatterji & Mehta 2007; Daniel 1996; Das 1990; Spencer 2004). Brutal attacks on individuals, in particular Dalits, and attacks often of a sexual nature on women and girls, are a constant rhythm meted out in the newspapers and TV channels, whilst extra-judicial attacks on those who flout caste boundaries, sexual norms or are accused (rightly or wrongly) of crimes themselves come in staccato beats. In recent months, the wildfire spread of false information through social media platforms such as ‘WhatsApp’ has resulted in violent attacks and murders of innocent individuals accused of child abduction, with more than twenty people so far known to have been killed.

There is a layering of violence and possibility here, the kind that leads to Vigh’s identification of certain environments as those in which crisis becomes a perpetual condition or a state analogous to context (2008). This rarely arises from “a sudden tear within the fabric of everyday normality” (Vigh 2008: 9) and is instead something that is the “the result of slow processes of deterioration, erosion and negative change – of multiple traumas and friction” (Vigh 2008: 9). Thus in Tarakhali, the state of crisis is understood not as the result of some dramatic break, but rather the continuous accumulation of more quotidian yet nonetheless significant events.

In this quiet and often peaceful village on a hot, still morning, these processes of disintegration, disappointment and rupture are in motion but superficially unnoticed. The forms of structural violence (Gupta 2012) that render this Muslim community frustratingly impoverished, under-educated and lacking adequate access to state provisions and resources (Sachar 2006; SNAP 2016). The religiously motivated symbolic and actual violence that has made public spaces for men here feel and become unsafe and over-scrutinised, or leaves them frustrated at dusty roadsides, yet again overlooked for work by Hindu contractors.

It is within this urgent context and fractured history that I will echo Das and others through calls to “interrogate the everyday as a site of the ordinary” (Das & Kleinman 2000: 2). In doing so I will acknowledge the challenges of the circumstances facing those in Tarakhali, as embodied in their experiences and their terms, reflecting Spencer’s observation that violence is something “usually culturally constructed and always culturally interpreted” (Spencer 2004: 473). It is within these legacies and circumstances of violence that we come to women’s lives in this village.

There exists “surprisingly little material” (Karlekar 2004: 309) on everyday violence against women in India. Those that have addressed this issue make clear the need for a wide-ranging definition, that

encompasses more than simply physical violence, and instead includes “exploitation, discrimination, upholding of unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of terror, threat, or reprisal and forms of religio-cultural and political violence” (Kelkar 1991: 1). In what follows I adopt a similarly loose and unconstrained definition of what constitutes violence, largely inspired by the various works of Veena Das. I understand it as something that may be physical, though also perhaps instantiated in other forms, in any number of combinations. It is something that may be seen from a variety of differing perspectives (Das 2007), its lurking presence further complicated by the fact that I do not assume that violence necessarily has a purpose, an end point or an aim (Das 2007).

In her seminal works on the subject, Das explores the rupture and reverberations that occurred around two extraordinary moments of communal violence in the subcontinent. Long after the bloodshed had ceased, and everyday temporal rhythms resumed, the tremors of horror for those involved are continuously experienced and renegotiated (Das 1996; 2007). In moving from such catastrophic events to the everyday, Das effectively dismantles any public and domestic binary between different modes of violence, instead revealing there to exist violences in an entangled myriad of ever shifting forms and absences. I am treading the path in the opposite direction, exploring how incremental acts of everyday violence negotiated by women here are related to wider structural constructs and processes. I will further suggest that in Tarakhali, the experience of violence and its expressions is something intensely gendered.

I build upon Das’ arguments in another way through exploration of the creative possibilities of violence. Through the examination of the dense multiplicities of tensions and “obstructions” (Das 2007: 81) that may occur amidst troubled family relationships in India, Das recognises these negotiations with violence to be “experimentation with the making of culture” (Das 2007: 86). This is something of particular significance in the entanglement of kinship and familial relationships that are so significant to animating the lives of women in Tarakhali and so often noted by them to be the most significant source of *tenshun*.

Therefore in this village I will similarly attend to the creative possibilities of such experimentations (Das 2007: 86) with violence, arguing that it’s navigation is fundamentally constitutive of female personhood. Women’s own definition of violence here, as the existence of another set of possibilities will be underscored to indicate that though women’s lives may at times be shaped and fashioned by violence, they are far from reducible to it.

[REDACTED]

Figure 6: Maryam

The *azaan* will sound just before dawn, as the stars gradually take their leave from the bruised sky and the first rays of the sun will begin to creep across the slowly awakening village. Since her husband’s car accident, in which he almost died, Summaya’s commitment to her faith has waned, and she no longer rises to perform the dawn *namaz* in the morning. Instead she rolls her sizeable form over, enjoying the hour or so more of sleep before her only son will wake up and demand her attention.

Down the road Nura will be awake, knowing full well the displeasure she will provoke from her own husband Aabir should he return from the *masjid* and find her still in bed as opposed to preparing the breakfast he will eat before he leaves to open his shop. He has stopped beating her so regularly now that her sons are older, though her lingering fear remains. Besides, she enjoys performing her prayers, as do many women here, savouring the quiet minutes of devotion as ‘amader nijer somoy’ [our own time], some of the few moments each day that are just for themselves. Her daughter Radhia will remain sprawled, warm and dozing in their bed, her three brothers sharing their own room next door. At just four years old she is still too young to pray or to help with the household chores, though this will not be the case for long.

Outside of their home, Shamsia might be glimpsed at the roadside, waiting patiently for her turn to fill two greying plastic Thumbs Up! bottles from the pump which she’ll gingerly shuffle home with clasped against her waifish form. Once returned, she will likely be tasked with watching over her younger siblings, whilst their mother Farhaza prepares breakfast for their father and helps her mother-in-law Khozana with cleaning the compound and feeding their assorted animals. Though only four years older than Radhia, at eight and as a girl she is already of an age where domestic chores have become an expectation and responsibility.

At the Loskor tea shop nearby, Reenu will also be awake. Behind the makeshift clapboard counter, she will likely be found carefully lighting the gas stove in order to warm the milk and begin to make *cha* for those who will finish their prayers and then return to the roadside, eager for a hot cup of tea to ease them into the day. Oil will begin to sizzle and spit, eggs cracked, spilling their golden slippery insides into the pan in order to fry, flip, fry and then be stuffed into a soft white roll as a ‘*bun omlet*’ for a handful of rupees. Though only fourteen, Reenu is, against her will, increasingly spending most of her time here making tea, counting change and keeping track of purchases in her shaky, still childlike writing in the ledger kept under the counter. Her fearsome mother Aksha has her own business to attend to in town, and now the shop has become the only source of their family’s income, she needs someone reliable to manage it in her absence.

Her elder daughter, Rojida, though perhaps on paper the more obvious candidate, will be nowhere to be seen. She is likely lying on a cot, defying both orders and expectations to get up with a shouted curse or stubborn silence, or perhaps is cycling furiously in the fields behind the clustered houses, throwing her bike down, lighting an illicit cigarette, texting a boy. At 18 months older than Reenu, with the weights and expectations of girls her age bearing down upon her heavily, she pushes, frantically back. In recent years there have been two failed marriages, two divorces, a rumoured kidnapping, in which she was lured to a meeting by a gang of men then taken all the way to Bihar, and given all of this, countless unsuccessful and increasingly frustrating marriage proposals. She is just 16.

In the house next door, Tabina is similarly cranky, another sleepless night in which the vivid scars from three different operations in the shabby local hospital that lace her stomach have caused her agony. Unable to afford proper after-care, she winces as she moves off of the bed, stuffing a wedge of *paan* in her mouth before moving gingerly to the door. Fortunately, she now has two daughters-in-law at home to perform the housework, leaving her free in the morning to enjoy a cup of tea at her in-laws' shop next door, before bathing and setting off for a morning devoted to *shorkari kaj*, in which she will cajole and coerce her way into local offices and confidences, surveying the political landscape. There is a slight concern: she has not heard from Sara since the incident some days ago in which she offered up a room in her house for a clandestine meeting between her and her illicit lover, for a sum of course. The meeting had turned violent, and Sara has disappeared.

Aliya will be awake, she always rises at dawn, evidenced by the deep purple lines that have carved permanent niches under her eyes. She begins her work early, tending to the garden, rousing her children, caring for her immobile husband before settling down alongside the *dadar* frame. Her daughter-in-law Muniya will likely be beside her, as may her daughter Jaccaria, helping with the latest intricate piece before she will leave for school a few hours later. Each day for her is at 18 an increasingly precarious balancing act between school, homework and the exhausting sewing work needed in order to keep their family just above the waters of destitution. Marriage looms low and dark like a monsoon raincloud, though fortunately for her, her mother's views on education mean she is still in school. This is just as well, as the family's extreme poverty make the requisite dowry payment a seeming impossibility at this time. She siphons off a few coins from her own meagre supply for her youngest brother, just 12, to buy a snack on the way home from school.

Men and school children leave the village, women move down roads and along paths to microfinance meetings or other highly localised activities. Those such as Aksha or Tabina will themselves be seen hitching a ride on the back of a 'van' to [REDACTED], sitting regally on the wooden clapboard

attached to a scooter that will drag them slowly up the road towards the town. As Aksha passes people will murmur, an eyebrow will be raised. “kaj korche? Sob somoy kaj korche...” [Is she working? All the time she is working...].

Khozana will bustle down the path from her homestead, making her own way into town, or perhaps clutching her fishing poles and heading in the opposite direction in order to spend a few hours hoping for a catch. Though her senior age and widow status tacitly permits such expeditions, her fiery personality means they are actively enjoyed by her daughter-in-law Farhaza, who will gain an hour or two to manage her own small household alongside her mother-in-law’s without being harshly reprimanded. For Khozana, a ‘*desher meye*’ [country girl] in her beloved *jonmostan*, the love and intimacy she enjoys with the land here is perhaps the closest and most cherished relationship she has.

Maryam will be sat on the steps of her daughter-in-law Tabina’s house. Though she has kept her own tiny mud-built hovel on the Loskor family shared plot (indicative of the long fractious relationship she has had with her cherished son’s two wives), she eats her meals here now, sharing the hearth and food of her more financially comfortable son and his family. Consequently, she has been sternly tasked as responsible for some of the culinary preparation, which she does in spite of her age and perhaps her hopes to be taken care of in her final, widowed years. Slowly peeling potatoes, sieving rice, she might rise gingerly, hearing the call of the fish and poultry ‘cuts’ selling women who cross this landscape each day selling scraps of meat and fresh prawns from wicker baskets overlaid by stained cloths to Muslim women unable to venture beyond the invisible boundaries of the village, or rich enough to buy such luxuries from the *bazaar*.

Later, on these same steps, once the morning congested with work has passed as has the heated crescendo of serving lunch, Aksha will have returned from the town and may be found leaning and laughing against her equally formidable sister-in-law Tabina as she oils and combs out her hair. Down the road, Khozana, Farhaza and their neighbour Aliya might be crammed alongside an assortment of dozing children into a tiny room in Khozana’s house watching a small and erratic television. In the opposite direction, Summaya will most likely be alone during the afternoon. Her plumpness, cheerful disposition and quick laugh have failed to charm those around her into friendship. Or perhaps it is her husband’s status as the first sari broker of the village that they resent, or that her mother-in-law was formerly *onchol pradhan*, a local political leader in the area, with all the financial trappings of government office to show for it.

Inside, watching television, she will miss her sister-in-law Sara alighting on the fringes of the village and walking down the road, large sunglasses hiding the bruise that is gently blossoming on her cheek, her left arm in a sling. She has lost none of her characteristic grace and poise, though there is a faltering quality to her movements, perhaps the result of an undercurrent of physical discomfort and



increasing shame. She'll walk purposefully to her large *pukka* house opposite the tea-shop, opening the gate and closing it behind her before walking down the short path to the open front door. Aksha will see her pass, her hand perhaps moving unconsciously to where months earlier her own wrist had been broken.

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Women talk about being women here as living in worlds filled with *tenshun*. Though a strange and anglicised import, this idea of tension eloquently encompasses the series of taut contradictions that compose much of female existence in this village as elsewhere in South Asia (Ring 2006) and more widely (Han 2012). Women are required to be desirable yet modest, practical, yet pious, hardworking yet unharried, successfully accomplishing a myriad of daily tasks involving the practised negotiation of a series of unyielding binaries. Often, these tensions may arise from the competing demands of roles they are simultaneously needed to fill. “mohiler jibon khub koshto, amra ki korbo?” [Women's lives are full of hardship, what will we do?]

These series of tensions begin in childhood, although such overt forms of violence towards girls and elderly women in parts of India remain “hardly perceived” (Karlekar 2004: 311) as such. Little girls such as Radhia and Shamsia are required to be spoilt, precocious and beautiful as well as willing to quickly ape the domestic capabilities of their mothers. From as young as six, girls here become small cogs in the larger machinations of female domesticity that run households just about surviving in extreme poverty. Thus, though Shamsia would be encouraged to sing and dance for me in the long sticky mornings under her grandmother Khozana's slow moving fan, she would also quickly be admonished for not attending to some other chore or issue which was deemed more pressing, such as fetching twigs for the fire under the cooking pot, or carefully distributing small plates of food to her younger siblings.

In this fashion, though coddled and adored, all children here but particularly girls are socialised from the youngest imaginable age to accept physical and verbal violence. Days do not pass in Tarakhali without a mother haranguing her child or someone else's, “chup! bolo na!” [Shut up! Don't speak!] with a hand flung out to deliver a pinch, a shove or a loud smack. Though both parents can behave towards their children in this way, it is only women who are deemed innately responsible for the behaviour of their offspring. Being a good mother in this village is understood by both men and women as fundamental to being a good woman, and women are harshly assessed by all around them in terms of their capacity to raise diligent, untroublesome, successful and compliant children.

Girls quickly learn the sublimation of their own desires, wants and needs to (male) others. From minding children younger than themselves to helping with cooking or other household chores, the

orbit of girls is smaller, domestic, whilst their male siblings ride bikes, jump in ponds and play football or cricket in one of the sprawling rice fields behind the village. This may in part explain the quizzical puzzlement women expressed when asked by me how they learnt skills such as to cook, or to make a broom or to wash dishes in the pond, when these were things they had been watching and doing almost all their lives.

The steady divergence between male and female lives, and masculine and feminine qualities and natures, becomes more pronounced as children enter puberty (Lamb 2000). As bodies swell and change, Western clothes of girlhood such as dresses and skirts are deemed too revealing and discarded in favour of loose-fitting *salwar kameez*, or tunics worn over jeans. A scarf will be worn across the chest, perhaps pulled over the head when encountering unfamiliar men or leaving the village. These changes are manifest also in an expectation of an eyes-cast-down quietness, a profound shift for girls, which is identified by others elsewhere as something deeply “disturbing” (Lamb 2000: 192). By around 13 or 14 years-old, many girls here will no longer be attending school, and those that do return home to domestic chores or sewing work alongside their mothers. They will also be expected to now embody the traits deemed appropriate for women. These are acquiescence, modesty, willingness to submit and a quiet determination and reluctance to complain or to themselves cause any troubles or tensions. If Reenu is beginning to demonstrate these qualities, Rojida defies them. Strongly built with a loud and aggressive temperament to match, relishing in jokes and mimicry and frequently causing arguments, these traits celebrated in men are, in her, indicative of Aksha’s bad mothering and her own problematic nature.

Once they are married, girls cross over the invisible threshold to womanhood. This is not least as they will leave their father’s home and move to that of their husband and in-laws, often an eagerly anticipated arrival in terms of easing the burden of female labour though one also feared and resented in terms of female social hierarchy (Gardner 1991; Jeffery 1979; Lamb 2000). They will now wear saris, pierce their left nostril, and adopt the bangles symbolic of marriage for Bengalis and others in India, irrespective of religion. When speaking of these early years, women describe a sense of overwhelming uncertainty and fear, as they struggled to come to terms with new surroundings conjoined with an entire host of new binaries. The most particular point they would stress was the uniqueness of every woman’s situation: “kichu khub bhalo, kichu bhalo, kichu kharap...alada poribare sob somoy oshanti hocche, tensun hocche, ki kosto!” [Some (situations) are very good, some good, some bad....different families all the time will have no peace, tension will be happening, what suffering!].

The exact nature of the tensions and binaries they will be required to mediate will entirely depend on the economic status, religious conservatism and personal dispositions of the households that they are

joining (Karlekar 2004). Links have been drawn in neighbouring rural Bangladesh between certain risk factors and high levels of violence in the lives of women (Schuler et al. 2008) including a lack of education, earning an income or contributing financially (Goetz & Sen Gupta 1996) and having a dowry payment (Bates et al. 2004; Schuler et al. 2008). Within the village of Tarakhali, intra-family *tenshun* or *jhogra*, or dispute or quarrel, was both the most prominent, and the most resented, by all of my female collaborators. For some with challenging in-laws such as Nura, it was learning how to match conservative practices with high household standards. How could she get the best produce for lunch but not violate the strict social norms of her husband by going to the market? (which she ultimately achieved by paying a neighbour a few rupees to do so on her behalf) or take on extra *dadar kaj* work without letting the household chores slip?

Though the specific kinds of *tenshun* arising from marital and other male relationships will be explored more fully in the next section, for others, *tenshun* became manifest in navigating more challenging relationships with other women. Almost all accounts of everyday female violence within India stress the significant role played by the extended family or the household within the production of these various forms of violence (Fernandez 1997; Karlekar 2004; Uberoi 2004). Elsewhere the role of gerontocracy within Muslim societies generally is underscored (Grima 1992) as undoubtedly another factor that engenders abuse endured by young women within multi-generational families.

The highly problematic nexus of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is a particularly revealing one across South Asia (Raheja & Gold 1994; Lamb 2000) as well as here. Maryam, whose toothy smile and girlish laugh made her easy company, was nonetheless often described by her daughters-in-law Aksha and Tabina in terms of harassment, violence and the occult. In recalling the first years of her marriage, Tabina described the situation as both so toxic and so terrifying that she had left Tarakhali and returned to her father's village. Whilst there, one night she had stood on eight needles which she was convinced her mother-in-law Maryam had used black magic to send her, the scars of which still dot her foot. Khozana was another one said to be a dangerous presence, who Farhaza explained stoked the violence between her and her husband Shoor, adding pressure to their tenuous financial situation and further challenging her ability to adequately perform her tasks as a wife and a mother.

Both of these elderly women would themselves complain of harsh treatment at the hands of their daughters-in-law, and their propensity for causing *tenshun* or *oshanti* (disturbance) within their formerly peaceful households, as their own personal domestic powers waned with their increasing fragility and age (Lamb 2000). Khozana would often be found muttering to herself about her disappointments, engaged in yet another back-breaking chore that should have been overseen by Farhaza, whilst Maryam's shambolic homestead and constant concerns over her financial security and future, she attributed to the jealousy and bitterness of her two avaricious daughters-in-law.

Although such complicated intra-female relationships are undoubtedly a source of *tenshun* here for women as elsewhere, in other contexts many accounts nonetheless unduly privilege the importance of “individualistic struggles that might set woman against woman” (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996: 3), in favour of underscoring the supportive agency manifested in “in the small-scale ways that women collaborate(d) with one another to deal with their problems” (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996: 3). More widely, these kinds of collaboration may take the form of female cooperative movements aimed at conservation practices or agriculture, which have been illustrated as improving productivity (Agarwal 2000; 2016), female driven social, political or religious movements (Jeffery & Basu 1998) or even the supportive practices of women living and working on urban constructions sites together (Bowers forthcoming).

Further, the in-depth ethnographies that do exist of women’s lives in comparable contexts across South Asia exemplify the importance of female connectivity and support as opposed to female conflict (Jeffery 1979; Gardner 1991). They provide significant evidence that the strength, solace and emotional fulfilment that women derive from relationships with other women is a far more common characteristic, as they share in the perversity of being women who as wives and mothers are always simultaneously both inside and outside domestic and familial units, or bride givers and bride takers, at the same time (Raheja & Gold 1994).

Within Tarakhali, there exists a deep enmeshment of women’s lives by which they practically deploy what power they possess in attempts to support and protect one another. Over time, dense networks of care and reciprocity become established between women in this village, to the extent they will only use kinship terms to describe other women they are close to such as *bou-ma* [daughter-in-law] or *bou-di* [sister-in-law] and consider their obligations to those dwelling alongside them as significantly as they do to family relations. Relationships become cemented and reinforced with incremental acts of kindness; Aliya taking a few grains of burnt rice from a cooking pot for Khozana to feed her collection of ducks; Nura saving water from washing in order to help to water Aliya’s extensive vegetable garden; Reenu watching over Farhaza’s children whilst she attends a microfinance meeting; or, Sara secretly lending Aksha some money in order to pay off an urgent debt.

The kinds of relationships and forms of personhood arising from such connectivity are both challenging to tease apart and themselves potentially inherently conflicted. Spencer underscores that for those who have experienced collective and extraordinary moments of violence, “the family emerges as a crucial mediating institution - a source of strength...but also a source of friction” (Spencer 2004: 480). Here too, for those dwelling at times in ordinary violence within the everyday,

the family could both come to represent extreme *tenshun* and the happiest kind of peaceful resolution and support.

Han notes a similar complexity of experiences of personhood for those living in comparable economic precarity and tackling equally challenging kinship relationships. In particular she observes the potential for differing relationships and their entailed obligations to collide with one another, in which “the self is simultaneously enmeshed in different relations that entail different demands and different desires” (Han 2012: 20). She identifies that this is something that is of notable significance for those just about surviving in economic precarity.

These sorts of messy overlaps necessitate for women in this village the cultivation of kinds of soft power and inherent flexibility. As will be explored fully in Chapter 6, this may have facilitated their success in their newfound role as primary bureaucratic negotiators on behalf of their families, as they are as a result by definition more able than men here to accept the inherently negotiation focused, transactional nature of the local Indian state.

One aspect of being a woman here involves the navigation of such binaries and *tenshun*. It is about being a wife, and a mother, in the particular circumstances unknowable in advance into which one enters. It is the feeling of being enveloped in a sea of mutual connections and obligations, some of them potentially dangerous and challenging. It is as women in this way that they move to tackle the violence that they will encounter.

### *Violence and Alternatives*

In a temporal landscape where monotony dominates, women would describe their lives as composed of two distinct portions, childhoods in family homes and their current married existence. Time was divided into before, in my father’s house, in “amader jonmostan” [my birth place], “amader nijer jaygah” [my own place] and “biye pore” [after marriage], “ekthane” [here], “tar jonmostan” [his birth place].

Exogamy is strictly practised here, and women will almost never marry within the village they are born in<sup>9</sup>, instead being transplanted into an entirely new set of circumstances through the dense Muslim networks of family and acquaintances that reach across the state. In a world of global flows, widely accessible and affordable travel and constant movement, these are existences that will be

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<sup>9</sup> This is typically only the case in instances of ‘love marriages’ that have not been arranged by families and have happened after girls and boys have met through school or by living in the same locality.

typically lived in just two homes, with two entirely separate groups of people, divided by a sharp, non-negotiable and life-altering break.

If lives before marriage were inflected and animated at times by the poverty and hardship endemic in this socio-economic landscape, there were nonetheless consistent references to the deep joy found in the company of siblings and friends, the love of parents or the occasional kind indulgence of being given a few rupees to catch a bus instead of walking to school. Metaphors of eating abounded in my collaborators' descriptions of their lives before marriage. Farhaza referred to this time as "jokhon ami porthome keyechilam" or when she was able to eat first, her parents feeding her before themselves in a deeply significant act of subservience and love with particular relevance in Indian and Muslim culture.

For her mother-in-law Khozana, who uniquely grew up in this village where she has now returned to reside, it was a time of the "boro chingri mach" or big prawns, that teemed in the ponds and composed so much of their diets that would today be seen as extremely extravagant. For Nura it was a time when "amra aro mach ar magsho keyechi bhat theke!" [We ate more fish and meat than we ate rice!] and a time of drinking warm, creamy buffalo milk from her father's herd. Perhaps for her 4-year-old daughter Radhia, her childhood will be similarly remembered as one of daily snacks consumed happily accompanied by warm, sticky sips of Mazda orange soda.

In contrast to these warm and perhaps nostalgically recalled childhood images, what women would not talk about was the event of marriage itself. Over time this became manifest as an absent presence in the otherwise open and vivid descriptions of their lives, a yawning gap that would be neatly side-stepped. As I began to attend to these silences as presences themselves (Kidron 2009; Visweswaran 1994) they became perhaps not dissimilar to the fragmented past experiences of Das' collaborators that were simply unable to find footing in the conversations of the present, indicative of how "language falters in the face of violence" (Das 2007: 205).

In her discussions of feminist ethnography, Kamala Visweswaran too confronts the silences of her collaborators around their own child marriages, as well as her own loaded positionality in how to represent them (Visweswaran 1994: 40-59). There exist marked similarities between her encounters and those of mine in Tarakhali, notably the obliqueness with which women would avoid her gentle questions around their experiences, matched by a willingness to talk about the experiences of others though not their own. This meant that here too "women's silences about their child marriages are bordered by descriptions of other child marriages" (Visweswaran 1994: 52) in a strange, displaced contradiction.

I too share Visweswaran's anxieties over how to represent these women's experiences (Visweswaran 1994: 47-50). The issues surrounding marital practices in India ranging from child marriage to *suttee*<sup>10</sup> have long drawn the Western gaze, from self-righteous colonial commentators to more recent, though similarly problematic, academic observers. Those writing in the opposite direction have necessarily and accurately problematised this obsessive focus (Mohanty 1988; 2012; Spivak 1994) in which women's lives trapped in such representations embody a "violent shuttling...caught between tradition and modernisation" (Spivak 1994: 102). Spivak has noted in particular in relation to the practice of *suttee* "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (Spivak 1994: 103). Visweswaran emphasises that in relation to the experiences of her collaborators Uma and Janaki "if we do not know how to "hear" silence, we cannot apprehend what is being spoken, how speech is framed" (Visweswaran 1994: 51). I have therefore tried repeatedly to hear this silence of my collaborators around the event of marriage that they themselves experienced, in part through complementing their silences with how they spoke about these practices more generally.

My eldest collaborator Maryam believes she was married at around 10 or 11 years-old, to a man at least three times her age, though she says she doesn't really know and nor does she remember anything, which given her youth at the time may not be surprising (Visweswaran 1994). In the next generation, those such as Nura, Aliya and my other collaborators in their thirties and forties were married at only 12 or 13 years-old, their husbands at least twice their age<sup>11</sup>.

All of these women were explicitly critical of *meyer biye* (marriage of girls). Specifically, they identified two aspects of this practice that were problematic in their eyes: firstly, by being married so young girls missed out on much needed education; and secondly, they were *sudhu meye* or 'just girls' when they went into their new households, meaning that "jane na" [they don't know]. There did thus exist a criticism in the abstract of the "nature of this category" (Visweswaran 1994: 52) of girl bride, though inevitably this was one that they all, too, embodied.

This opinion was as strongly voiced by girls who were themselves yet to be married. Although the age gap between men and women who are going to be married has begun to shrink as the result of wider societal pressures stipulating the legal minimum age of marriage for girls here should be 18, the murky overlap between Islamic and civil law meant that I knew of three girls aged just 15 and 16 years-old who were married whilst I was in the village. Aliya's daughter Jaccaria would visibly recoil at the suggestion that at 18 she might soon be married, stating that she wished to continue studying for

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<sup>10</sup> *Suttee* was the funeral practice in which Hindu widows would immolate themselves on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. It was outlawed in India by British colonising forces in 1861.

<sup>11</sup> The proliferation of marriages carried out with such an age gap results in significant numbers of women being widowed in their forties and fifties in this village, becoming subsequently reliant on their children to take care of them.

many more years before this happened, until she was at least 25 years-old. Though Gardner has noted this overt emotion and reluctance towards marriage may in part be the performative embodiment of necessary Islamic piety and good upbringing (1991), in Tarakhali there lacked this sense of dramatization. Reenu was very clear that she wanted to become a police officer, and only then would she get married, once she had learnt to protect herself.

The age of marriage also continues to represent a significant flashpoint for *tenshun* between women and their husbands, and fathers and their daughters. Reenu's sister Rojida at only 16 had been married twice before in failed marriages, that neither she nor her family were prepared to talk about openly. This did not stop the whispers from others, including her sister-in-law Remiya, of the violent confrontations that took place over this issue within the household between husband and wife, and father and daughter.

A further criticism made of marriage by women here is the practice of dowry, something that will be lurking at the social peripheries from the moment that they as girls are born. Not only must all girls marry here, their families will have to pay extraordinary amounts of dowry in the forms of cash and kind to the groom's family in order to make this possible. The current minimum expenditure hovers at around 1 lakh, or £1000, an extraordinary sum for many families that subsist on less than five thousand rupees (£50) each month. The better the girl is considered to be, the more beautiful, pious or domesticated, the better her prospects and by extension those of her whole family, and the lesser the dowry.

The role that dowry plays in exacerbating the violence that women may be subjected to within new marital homes has been explicitly explored across India (Fernandez 1997; Jeffery 1979; Karlekar 2004). Karlekar (2004) notes the prominence of a North Indian saying that a girl is "paraya dhan" or 'another's wealth' as signifying both the transient and temporary nature of unmarried girlhood, as well as the assumptions about women in marriage arrangements as little more than material objects. Dowry and its associated tensions and obligations are thus a further intersecting element of gender, age and social hierarchies that create an "ambivalent position" (Fernandez 1997: 44) for women and girls both within their unmarried and married households.

Dowry practices in this village as well as more widely show no sign of abating. Patricia and Roger Jeffery have recorded a significant escalation in terms of the prevalence of dowry payments in rural communities in which they worked over several decades, as well as the steep rise in terms of what is being asked for (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996). This is in spite of 1961 legislation explicitly forbidding the practice across India. The National Crime Bureau India (NCB) report in 2015 identified 7,634 deaths



occurring that year as the result of women killed or forced to commit suicide over the issue of dowry (NCB 2015: 83). These are just those that are recorded.

From these silences and criticisms around arguably the most ‘critical event’ (Das 1995) of almost every single woman’s life in this village, I want to advance a definition, imbued by their own representations and understandings, of what for them constitutes unacceptable violence or suffering here. Violence or suffering, in these terms, is manifested within actions or circumstances where there simultaneously exist alternative, to them preferable, possibilities.

Thus marriage, arranged or otherwise, would never in itself be considered to be a form of unacceptable violence. It is viewed as not only an inevitable part of female life trajectories, but a desirable one intimately linked with physical intimacy, the promise of children and thus the potential embodiment of becoming a good mother, and by definition here, a good woman. Yet other features of marriage as instantiated within this village, to take dowry payments as the element most frequently and vehemently critiqued and actively disliked, represent the kind of everyday violence women are forced to navigate.

From the moment they are born, as women, they will be negotiating the tensions that their imminent dowry payment will bring to their household. Once mothers themselves, they will have to mediate the potential upset should they give birth to girls, an outcome that given the indexing between children and their mothers, will likely be deemed to be their responsibility. As will be emphasised in Chapter 5, as women in this village they are also likely to be the ones shouldering the accompanying financial burden for dowry payments, taking out hefty microfinance loans which will require hours of painstaking, badly remunerated *dadar kaj* embroidery work to repay. Other features of married women’s lives here can help to flesh out further this definition.

Once married, a woman may become faced with forms of physical violence. Other ethnographers working with rural Muslim women in South Asian contexts have noted being asked about domestic abuse in their own marital contexts (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996). Further they have similarly recorded what in Tarakhali was a pervasive willingness to speak about others being beaten by their husbands, or to speak in the third person, matched with a deep resistance of speaking directly about their own experiences (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996; Ring 2006).

One evening I had sat up with Nura late into the night, joined by her next-door neighbour Selma. As we talked through the regular power cut, her gas lamp set in the middle of the earthen floor casting dancing orange shapes and shadows across the walls, Nura first openly raised the apparition of physical domestic abuse that lingered like a fine yet tangible mist around the village.

N: jhogra hoy?

L: kichu समय..

N: kono din mere chilo?

L: hoy na! Ekhane shami stri mara kore?

N: (laughing loudly) ekhane hoy!

L: apnar sami apnader mere chilen?

N: ekhane hoy! age mereche kintu ekhon chelera boyosh ache hoy na.

S: onek somosa hocche, ekhane...

N: meye hospitale diyeche! (Laughing loudly)

[N: Do arguments happen?

L: Sometimes..

N: Has he ever hit you?

L: That's never happened! Do men hit their wives here?

N: (laughing loudly) It happens here!

L: Has your husband hit you before?

N: It happens here! Before he has hit but now the boys are older it doesn't happen

S: Many problems happen here....

N: Girls are given to hospital! (Laughing loudly)]

Nura's sister had herself been strangled to death by her husband after repeatedly begging him to allow her to undertake some of the *dadar kaj* embroidery work most other women in her village were involved in. The childhood friend of Summaya had also been killed. In a fractious marriage surrounded by an abusive extended family, she had given birth to a baby girl when a son had been demanded. Initially threatened with a divorce, her husband had then poured kerosene over her and set her alight.

Physical abuse from husbands towards their wives here, though common, was considered to be an unacceptable kind of violence, at least by those brave or reckless enough to speak about it. This was embodied by Nura's sons' intervention on behalf of their mother, to protect her from the repeated beatings that she was being subjected to, or Farhaza's threats to her husband Shoor that she would leave him and return to her father's village or call the police the next time he beat her so badly that she bled. Both the former *onchol pradhan*<sup>12</sup> Nimra, and the wife of the current village *panchayat*

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<sup>12</sup> A local bureaucratic figure. See Chapter 6.

leader not only confirmed the prevalence of domestic violence within Tarakhali, they noted their unfailing support of the wife in such circumstances: “lagbe na!” [It is not needed!].

The kinds of marital stipulation for women here that to Western feminist observers may be deemed instantiations of symbolic male or societal violence, such as the requisite nose-piercing and wearing of bangles as the unmistakable, non-negotiable physical embodiments of a woman’s married status, would be laughingly dismissed as such by the women I knew. The majority were similarly ambivalent about the practice of polygamy, which only in rare circumstances, for certain women, represented an unacceptable form of violence, as will be explored further through Malika’s story in Chapter 5.

However, the deep inequality in terms of labour and domestic responsibilities regardless of whether it is the man or the woman who is the primary breadwinner has increasingly come to be seen as an unfair distortion of power dynamics and an unacceptable form of suffering, as will be further underscored through later chapters. Of similar importance, as previously mentioned, the responsibility women bear for the bad behaviour of their children is something experienced and expressed as a significant and unjustified burden.

Outside of the home, other features of women’s lives here can nuance and deepen a reading of violence as the existence of possibility. Though to outsiders the manifestations of poverty experienced by those here might be termed off-shoots of structural violence, women here would not define them as such. Close proximity to neighbours, tiny houses, shared bedrooms and listening in-laws, with all of their additional challenges to privacy and intimacy, are givens in these lives lived on the margins. Exposure to the elements, ailments for which treatment cannot be afforded, accidents and weather damage to houses in which “it is impossible to shut out nature, even if one particularly wanted to” (Gardner 1991: 16), are the expected conditions of everyday life, as opposed to instantiations of structural violence. Thus when Nura’s neighbour Selma’s house was torn down in a storm, she could be seen laughingly standing on top of the rubble of her former, *kacca* homestead, shrugging her shoulders and saying that they would have to rebuild, an instantiation of an often heard refrain in this village that will accent the discussions that follow: “amra ghorib lok - ki korbo?” [we are poor people – what will we do?]

Though poverty and precarity were themselves not articulated as unacceptable kinds of violence here, the absence of adequate state assistance in addressing such circumstances was explicitly criticised as such. The failure of the Indian state to adequately care for those in this village is a constant refrain, particularly for women and their female children who in times of scarcity will be those to first go without (Karlekar 2004; Uberoi 2004). Hunger and lack of resources are the primary ways in which

living on the margins is made manifest, and better nutrition for boys, a privileging of their schooling and tuition over female siblings and subsistence on the poverty line requiring the input of girl child labour means that women here, as in other Muslim communities in West Bengal, often grow up under-fed, under-educated and under-nurtured (Sachar 2006; SNAP 2016).

Criticisms of the selfishly motivated allocation of aid to those close to political actors and the ubiquitous nature of bribery and corruption to the extent that “taka debe, kaj hobe” [if you pay, the work will happen] are the regular refrains when discussing any potential bureaucratic interventions. Yet as will be explored in Chapter 6, women nonetheless possess a nuanced definition of what are acceptable forms of greediness on the part of the state and political actors, with excessive ‘eating’ regarded as a violence, though eating until satisfied is accepted as an inevitable practice. This is bolstered by their own willingness to ‘eat’ from the state in ways not explicitly sanctioned, should the rare opportunity arise. The inability to respond violently, or with the socially sanctified means, will be explored later on with those who fail to navigate the tensions of everyday existence successfully. Firstly, Aliya’s story, to show how in the most challenging circumstances imaginable, a woman can nonetheless be extremely skilled in navigating violence and seeking out possibility.

### *Aliya’s Story*

“sudhu buddhiman aar dhoni poribarey ei jinnish ache...ekahne sob diner eki somoy ache“  
[Only intelligent or rich families have this...here all days have the same time].

I had asked Aliya what days felt special here, how they were distinguishable from one another in a temporal landscape lacking my own familiar London rhythm of frantic five-day weeks of work and lazy, sociable weekends. I had asked her for instance, what days for her family were important, which did she particularly look forward to. She had responded in a characteristically measured fashion, demonstrating an awareness of the richness of the lives others lived, whilst remaining unemotional about the challenges of her own existence.

The first of nine children, Aliya offers a rare smile when describing an impoverished though happy childhood with kind and caring parents who loved her and worked constantly in order to combat their financial precarity. Yet whilst she describes the time at her father’s house as that when she was most content, the one clear memory she reveals is that of violence. Her uncle was a politician, and his home had been surrounded by a violent and drunken mob. They had broken in, taking a week-old baby, her cousin, from a crib and smashing it against the wall and killing it, dragging her uncle out into the fields with a gun in his mouth and beating him up so badly that his leg had to be amputated and he almost died. Now he has a prosthetic limb and is, at 70 years-old, still an active political party worker.

As these snatches from her childhood illustrate, Aliya's life is one full of contradictions. She was married at only 13 years-old to Jasim, leaving school literate but, deeply saddening for her, undereducated, in spite of her apparent natural intelligence. She takes great pride that her two youngest sisters are still in school and university respectively, and she is hugely driven to protect the schooling of her own children, even though the financial odds are stacked against them. She spends a thousand rupees each month, around a quarter of the family's monthly income, on tuition, perhaps explaining why the loss of her parents and her children failing to work hard at school are the two things she says that upset her the most.

This quiet pragmatism and a considered deliberateness of action are some of her notable characteristics. She is straight talking and fair, willing to offer well-earned praise or deserving criticism, dependent on the circumstances. She is serious, yet occasionally, wonderfully silly, and we erupt into joyful and slightly disbelieving giggles when she reveals that all of her sons, Inamul, Imran, Iftikhar and Irfan, are named not in keeping with her father-in-law's wishes (as is the custom here), but after players in the dashing Pakistani cricket team.

Though married young, unlike many women here the first years of Aliya's marriage are spoken about by her as positive, though the event of marriage itself remains unarticulated. Her husband's family were kind, and they owned several *bighas*<sup>13</sup> of land in the village. "onara konodin maf koren ni ar bolen ni je amar kaj kharap..." [they didn't abuse me and they never said my work was bad]. After they were married Jasim had begun training as a tailor, staying initially in Sonarpur on the fringes of Kolkata for a couple of years and only visiting the village every 15 days or so. This meant she was treated almost as a daughter by her parents-in-law, slowly learning the ways of being an adult woman and avoiding, in what are her own representations, the at that time terrifying spectre of intimacy with her husband.

After two years he returned and began working in the [REDACTED] bazaar at the 'Prince Tailors' shop where he stayed employed for almost a decade. They had several children in quick succession. He could be occasionally physically abusive towards her, although Aliya was more challenged by his difficult or stubborn personality. "kothin chilo" [he was difficult], she said, but she had learnt to manage his temperament and his expectations.

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<sup>13</sup> A bigha is a traditional unit for the measurement of land in South Asia that varies slightly from region to region. In West Bengal it corresponds to 1600 square yards or roughly a third of an acre.

Fourteen years ago, everything began to change. “That piece of land where the primary school is now? That is our land”. Back then it had been identified by the local government as a good place in which to build a much needed and desired primary school for Tarakhali. Local officials had approached the family with the suggestion, but they had politely refused: they enjoyed farming and, did not want to sell their land. When others in the village had learnt of the proposition, “amader gramer lok” [our village people] - they too began to suggest the land be sold. “People around us began to put pressure on us to sell the land to them, but we refused. We didn’t want to sell it, and the sum they were offering was much, much too small, only 1 lakh for 4 or 5 *bigha*”.

Over the following years, Jasim and Aliya were subject to an increasing campaign of intimidation and violence. Pointed requests and repeated attempts at persuasion from the local authorities gave way to obstruction, property damage and a bewildering absence of recourse to justice. People would refuse to lend or sell them the implements necessary for farming, or when new equipment was purchased it was broken and vandalised overnight, along with the crops they were growing. When Jasim and Aliya had gone to the police, they had just “mukh bondo rekhey chilo” [kept their mouths shut] and refused to investigate “jokhon amra thaana giyecho...tokhon police sudhu boleche jao! se ghush kheyechhe” [when we would go to the police station...then the police would just say go! They had taken / eaten bribes].

After years of enduring this, in desperation, finally a sale was agreed. On the day on which it took place Jasim was struck down with some form of mental or physical paralysis from which he has never recovered. Although deeply pragmatic about her circumstances, Aliya has sought out *protek manoush* (every person) and all their myriad cures for her husband ranging from the familiar to the more obscure. After local doctors in the dilapidated and ill-equipped hospital nearby failed to provide any form of explanation or treatment, she scraped together the money in order to take Jasim to see an ‘expert’ doctor in Kolkata. The man in question told her with a brutal though calmly delivered honesty that whatever had affected her husband, in his opinion he would never be able to work again and was unlikely to recover.

There were also the *gunnins*, practitioners of forms of healing with roots traceable to local folk beliefs, Sufi Islam and Arabic numerology. These individuals, usually Muslim though sought out by those from every faith, provide a range of cures to treat bodily ailments, marital disputes, problems with work or in more extreme cases, bewitchment or being caught by *jinn*. How much had she spent? A total of ten thousand rupees. R2000 here, R500 there, R1000 elsewhere. When one failed to work, she would seek out another one. A common diagnosis of ‘*ubri bap*’ (on top of sitting – possessing) had been given.

Jasim now rarely leaves the main room of their homestead. Occasionally, he may be seen wandering through the fields surrounding the house or moving falteringly to or from the *masjid* where he will offer *namaz*. Each day he does not rise until around 5pm, and may spend an hour or two awake before falling back into sleep. She describes his waking mind as *khali* (free) as though perhaps untethered from its former moorings in reality, floating unencumbered above the daily concerns and pressures that inflicted so much damage. At just 38 years-old, her circumstances for the past seven years have more closely resembled those of a widow.

It is due to this tempestuous and turbulent history that Aliya can most often be found alongside the pale *dadar* frame on her mud veranda overlooking her verdant and well-tended vegetable garden. In addition to her sewing work and her fruit and vegetable business, she has carved out for herself a number of other informal labour opportunities. Some days she works in the farmer's fields behind the village, providing extra hands to sow the crops or to collect the harvest before the rains will come. In exchange, she is provided with some small remuneration, as well as the materials and labour to help her make repairs to the roof and the walls of her *kacca* house.

She is also a willing cook and server, providing the food and dishing it out for the wedding of her next-door neighbour Khozana's son Mubarak's wedding, or at the subsequent funeral gatherings of her mother-in-law *nani* Ashima. When the times are right, she also works as a 'vote capturer' on behalf of the TMC, applying political pressure to those that use the path that runs up from the road and alongside her house, deeper into the village. Whilst she acknowledges this does not provide any financial or material benefit, it is a protective measure. By doing so, she knows she is politically guarded and may no longer be targeted, which given her past, is deeply comforting.

Aliya also draws strength from her faith and belief in God, "shokti dan" [he gives power] she says happily when discussing Islam, though she is philosophical about its shortcomings. She says that she thinks that women must become educated in order to be able to read the *Quran* themselves and generate their own textual interpretations of the faith in which she is sure they will have greater equality. In the long and intense discussions we would have around faith, she would answer my questions and then, after a pause, murmur a firm yet quietly delivered addition always beginning the same way: "proshno acche.." [I have a question]

The role of those around her in her downfall has not left her isolated nor ostracized. Rather she has dug deeper into the infinite networks and invisible bonds that comprise female village existence here, using her connections as possibilities to improve her family's situation and ensure their financial survival. That said, she expects nothing from anyone including the government. "kichu dai ni" [they have given nothing] was her constant refrain when describing local offices and political parties, and

she was notably surprised when her daughter Jaccaria was given a bicycle on which to ride to school as part of Mamata's much lauded scheme to encourage girls to remain in higher education.

Aliya is thought by everyone I knew in Tarakhali to be a good woman. "uni bhalo" [She is good] people would say, on learning that I had whiled away a couple of hours chatting on the mud veranda of her house before paying them a visit. These were notable assertions both in their universality and their expression of approval and validation, in contrast to the critical and sharp-tongued candour that I came to associate with village lives lived in such intimate and exposing proximity.

There were no textures or gradients in people's description of goodness in Tarakhali that could allude to some deeper meaning or explanation. There was no other diversity of language. Aliya was good in the way that a child's performance at school might be good, the weather that week had been good (a rarity) or a well-cooked lunchtime fish curry would be appreciated as good by an eager, returning husband. Something else in these pronouncements drew my attention. When pushing for more, "keno? keno uni bhalo?" [Why? Why is she good?] I would be met with a statement not about her, but about her way of dealing resourcefully with her circumstances through generating future possibility. "khub koshto ache, kintu sob somoy kaj kore" [She has a lot of suffering / hardship, but all the time she works] or "taka kom tai bhalo skule chele-meye jete pare na, kintu se chesta kore shobai bhalo porashona koruk" [There isn't a lot of money so her children can't go to a good school, but she tries to make sure they all do good studying].

It became clear that these were not necessarily qualities innate within Aliya herself. Though it may be possible to extrapolate from these statements and convert them into another, virtual universe of virtue perhaps as qualities such as diligence, pragmatism or determination, instead it seems more fitting to privilege these innate understandings of goodness not as a quality, but rather as a response, or skill, deployed to handle the most challenging situations and forms of everyday violence.

Aliya's mediation of quotidian tensions, between herself and her husband, her family and their neighbours and, ultimately, her status as a woman with the management of a household, was what had earned her the respect and admiration of everyone in this village. Further, her refusal (in contrast as we shall see, to some of those who live around her) to respond with emotions deemed inappropriate for a woman here such as overt anger, frustrated complaint or hurt, social withdrawal, has enabled her in spite of everything to retain significant esteem and standing within her community.

Aliya has faced what would be defined both by her, and by others here, as forms of unacceptable violence. Some are familiar, such as being beaten by one's husband, though nonetheless regarded as undue, if in many cases, inescapable, suffering. More unusually and significantly for her, she has



experienced property damage, psychological pressure, spousal dependency through illness, extortion and ultimately, theft, from both those around her and local actors within state bureaucracy including police and politicians. Her navigation of these issues, and the way she has continuously sought out possibility in the most challenging of situations, is remarkable.

In her discussions of domestic violence in India, Karlekar has identified a woman's sense of self once married in relation to everyday violence as something "constantly assailed" (Karlekar 2004: 318). Yet Aliya's life story reveals to us that this is not a simplistic or solely brutal encounter. Instead, through successful navigation of such kinds of everyday violence, subjectivities may be forged, and possibilities may, nonetheless, be generated.

It is stemming from these experiences that Aliya has carved out her more recent role as a vote capturer for the TMC, made herself the first woman to be picked if a spare pair of hands is required for labour in the village and, arguably, used her husband's incapacity to ensure that unlike the majority of girls her age in Tarakhali, her daughter Jaccaria remains at 18 still in education. Thus her navigation of everyday violence is not solely an embodiment of past and present crisis and suffering, but has rather served to dynamically reframe her "realm of possibilities" (Vigh 2006: 483).

[REDACTED]

Figure 7: Aliya at her *dadar* frame

### *Struggles and Possibility*

“se bipojjonok” [she is dangerous] her daughters-in-law would say of Maryam, when she may happen to amble slowly across the open space of the homestead which she shared with her two remaining sons and their families. “age..ki bhoy legeche!” [Before...what fear was striking!] they would say, laughing at memories of their younger selves who had been terrified of this now aged and docile woman, though it is hard to imagine the forthright Tabina and formidable Aksha as scared of anything.

There is evidence elsewhere in West Bengal amongst both those who are Hindu (Lamb 2000), and in Muslim communities more widely, that widowhood precipitates a far sharper and more violent change in the lives of formerly married women than it does in Tarakhali. Here, although a nose piercing should be taken out and the requisite Islamic mourning rituals attended to, there are not the same aesthetic, consumptive and behavioural changes required to embody one’s widowed status. Widows in Tarakhali do not wear white saris or experience any other enforced comportment changes, and they are still able to eat meat, fish, sweets and spicy foods sometimes prohibited elsewhere (Lamb 2000).

The nature of the joint family system that dominates homestead structures in this village mean that it is likely that they will already have begun to cede control over the main living space to their sons and their grandchildren, so they are typically able to remain living exactly where they were, on their own land. However, they will begin to experience “declining powers” (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996: 245) over the family unit and the household that may have accrued whilst their husband was still alive, and they had daughters-in-law to perform the majority of the household labour. This means that as with all women here, their ability to enjoy an untroubled existence in old age will be to a large extent dependant on their ability to navigate tension within their households and dispel forms of everyday violence.

Thus, the life that a widow will lead following her husband’s death is most dependant on the relationships that she has cultivated with her sons and their families. Whether she will adopt the role of revered elderly matriarch, still terrifying mother-in-law or abused and unwanted house guest is largely determined by the thick emotional mattress of memories, behaviours, kindnesses and slights that have taken place over the preceding decades. In Maryam’s case this meant she remained disliked but begrudgingly tolerated. She was expected to assist with the less rigorous household chores such as preparing vegetables or washing dishes in the pond. Her failing eyesight and slowing gait meant that she would be incapable of supporting herself alone here, thus she blank-facedly accepted it when insults or commands were hurled her way, resigned in an almost childlike dependency.

Though strict prohibitions may not exist for widows here, they are still undoubtedly not ‘women’ in quite the same way that they were before. The rules governing comportment are notably slackened. Maryam could often be seen not wearing a sari blouse, an unthinkable show of immodesty for a younger, married woman here. Khozana would openly talk about her bodily functions (much to the horror of my young male research assistant Kishore) and refused to clean her teeth properly due to an aching tooth, meaning close conversations with her were at times unpleasant. Widows enjoy much more freedom to roam around unaccompanied, able to visit the town or to wander in the surrounding fields and jungle, which Maryam would do in order to collect edible plants and those which could be used as medicine, whilst Khozana would seek out a quiet spot to fish.

If widows are women here who are not really considered female in the way that others are, Khozana fails to embody other feminine traits through her cultivation of other undesirable and unfeminine qualities. “hingsha” [jealous] “lobhi” [greedy] “kharap” [bad] were just some of the labels applied to Kaki by both her extended family members and her neighbours in the village. She was known to be miserly, threatening to make her son Shoor and his family pay rent for their tiny dwelling on her property, yet simultaneously over indulgent to her youngest son Mubarak who refused to work and was continually abusive towards her. Her children were considered to be a reflection of her poor parenting and dubious character. Amongst them there had been failed marriages, lack of employment and despite being financially capable of prioritising her children’s education, the fact she hadn’t meant that some were barely literate.

Yet Khozana is other things that draw begrudging admiration. She is fearless and socially adept, willing to confront anyone who speaks ill of her or her family as well as combat any attacks that might be sent in her direction. She is deeply pious and able to read Arabic, relishing her participation as a widow in the *Shab-e-Barat* ritual in which the graves of the departed are tended in an all-night vigil. She is also of this land, having both been born here and returned to live here, quite unusually, after her marriage. In these ways she balances her bad and potentially stigmatising behaviour with her openly demonstrated piety, her fearlessness and her deep connections to the landscape.

Sara is another who utilises their significant social capital to offset any tensions that might arise from their morally dubious or otherwise questionable behaviour. Sara is sexy, oozing glamour and salaciousness in a manner that was both incongruous here and slightly unnerving in its strong undercurrent of impropriety. She loves fashion, make-up and shopping, regularly requesting I bring her back dark red or purple lipsticks when I would visit Kolkata and speaking with disdain about the appearances of the other women in the village and their perceived lack of style and sophistication. When she would emerge, preening and extremely conscious of her audience, in order to make the short journey to school each morning, mutters could be heard from those at the water pump: “aar ekta

notun sari?" [another new sari?]. She wore sunglasses and carried parasols to protect her swaying figure from the glaring sun, affectations that not a single other woman in the village indulged in, except when deliberately trying to 'become seen', as will be explored further in Chapter 6. She was also widely known to be conducting an extramarital affair with a man from a neighbouring village, whose jealousy and passion for her was increasingly jeopardising the thin veil of respectability she had so far just about managed to maintain.

Yet similarly she navigates the social tensions and violence of gossip and rumours by offsetting them with other attributes. Her family is indisputably wealthy, one of the handful to have a brick-built *pukka* house in the village, with a television set inside as well as an indoor bathroom. Both her husband, a police officer, and herself as a primary school teacher have government jobs, positions that are hugely coveted and almost unimaginable for the majority in Tarakhali. She is also generous with her money, often sending her daughter Nahida across the road to the teashop with a handful of notes to buy some sweets and biscuits for the assembled company of children who loiter hungrily, hopefully, around the shop front.

Finally, Sara possesses a shade of exoticism that permits her to deftly navigate the expectations and obligations experienced by other women in the village. She is the only religious convert here, relinquishing her formerly Christian faith when she married her Muslim husband many years ago. She is also educated to a higher level, having studied in Rajasthan at one point where she learnt to speak a little bit of faltering and now out of practice English. These multitude of factors weave together and combine to mean that, despite her significantly questionable behaviour, she is able to maintain an air of removed, intimidating authority which shields her from any open hostility or disdain from others.

Others are not as skilled at balancing these tensions of existence and navigating successfully through different kinds of everyday violence. Aksha is the one of those whose lives we have moved through who has failed most spectacularly, and in public, in manoeuvring through the challenges of female existence here unscathed.

Aksha is widely regarded to be a failure as a mother. This is something that is so unforgivably damaging that it would never be openly articulated, and thus has to be gradually read into the pages of her story with repeated and sustained analysis. Slowly, one begins to recognise the willingness of people to visit her tea shop, and yet the refusal of many to allow their children to do the same, reprimanding them sternly when catching them loitering around the alluring counter stuffed with jars of candies. There is further the reluctance to let their children in anyway socialise with hers or her grandchildren, and therefore there exists a complete absence of a child from any other household to ever be found in her homestead.

In a village of open doorways, no windows and the ability to wander in to someone else's house entirely uninvited at almost any given opportunity, this represented both a significant absence and an undeniable presence. Some had taken more obvious steps. Sara installed an iron gate at the end of her brick path. It was to protect her mischievous grandson Nihan from that, she had said grasping his small, chubby arm in one hand, and with the other gesturing towards the tarmac road. It was only later that I realised that by that, she had meant Aksha, whose shop and home was directly opposite, as opposed to the passing traffic.

There was undoubtedly some grounding to these fears and apprehensions. Aksha's daughter Rojida had been married and divorced at least twice at just 16 years old. Her eldest son Purtab, was an aloof and reserved man who spent most of his time smoking and playing cards outside of his computer shop in which the single, ancient computer didn't work. He had initially trained to be a bus driver, though had struck and killed a small girl when she had stepped off the verge in front of his vehicle without looking. This had left him deeply traumatised and the family with a civil law case ongoing after criminal proceedings had inevitably dragged on and disintegrated. Aksha's husband Ali-Hami had been similarly embroiled in scandal and legal proceedings, after driving his rickshaw under the influence of alcohol had caused him to lose his employment that he had formerly shared with his brother, and brought further disgrace, particularly as a Muslim, on his family.

In order to ensure her family's survival, Aksha began the tea shop in the village around two years ago, which has now become very successful. Her hard work, and frequent and unaccompanied visits to [REDACTED] town mean she now faces frequent insinuations. "sob somoy kaj korche..." people would say, as she passed yet again on a vehicle heading into town. "ki korbe okhane? amader mohiler lok jane na" [What does she do there? Us women certainly don't know]. It was after many months of this that I finally understood the inference that she was working as a prostitute, which became substantiated by whispers of her "having a place" in the bazaar where *byabsha* or business could happen.

Aksha would also frequently break a further prohibition of being a woman here, through her willingness to respond to challenges and tensions with a violence of her own. One evening as the trilling of bicycle bells signalled the end of the working day and people beginning to make their way along the road towards home, a commotion had started up. Aksha had set down her cloth behind the shop counter and stepped out onto the tarmac. She had collared a young boy passing on a bike, smashing him off of his moving bicycle before standing, hands gesturing violently over him as she

verbally admonished him for “eve-teasing”<sup>14</sup> her daughter Rojida. People averted their eyes and sucked their teeth in disgust, not at the boy’s actions, but at this woman’s public and violent spectacle, ushering their children away from the figure in a tattered sari, mouth stained red with *paan*, flinging curses and swearwords at a young boy sprawled across the tarmac.

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In contexts where extra-domestic ethnic, religious or racial tensions exist, the constant mediation of such tensions within more localised and contained contexts has been recognised as “the product of a relentless creative labour” (Ring 2006: 3). Most often, this is something undertaken by women (Das 2008; Spencer 2004) who encounter and negotiate with forms of violence away from militarised zones, borders or battlegrounds and instead conduct their own peace-keeping activities in homes, villages and communities.

Within Tarakhali, such schisms outside of the domestic sphere, that produce what are viewed here as unacceptable kinds of violence, are not themselves cross-cutting. All here in this village are Bengali, all are Muslim and all are impoverished. Instead of mediating tensions stemming from their occupation of different positions within this community itself (Ring 2006), women here instead work to mitigate the tensions and the everyday violence that their shared position as Muslim women and poor within a highly stratified, increasingly religiously predatory Indian society entails and reinforces.

The navigation of various forms of *tenshun* within this intimate and micro-cosmic universe of village life is an all-consuming and highly skilled occupation that women have no choice but to undertake. As has been shown through the exploration of their lives, it is a role that is context dependant, constantly shifting and in which a multitude of different positionalities may be taken. Further, as in other situations where women mediate social and domestic tensions in extreme poverty, this precariousness often engendered conflict between their different “affective stakes” (Han 2012: 13), pitting roles such as wife, mother, daughter and woman against one another.

The relationships, intimacies and obligations that will be forged with other women around them (similarly involved in their own personal balancing acts) reveal themselves to be at the forefront of their successful survival. In contrast to elsewhere, these relationships for women here are far more significant than those maintained with natal kin (Lamb 2000) though they may take a more practical and caring guise than the emotional intimacy characteristic of Western friendships (Ring 2006: 52).

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<sup>14</sup> An expression dominant in South Asia identifying the making of sexual remarks or cat-calling women by men in public places.

Spencer has suggested that an anthropology of violence could be conceived of as “a kind of mapping of the different moral and aesthetic evaluations people in different contexts make of their actions on the bodies of others” (Spencer 2004: 473). In this chapter, I hope to have reflected such a broad and encompassing definition that attempts to capture the ways in which women’s bodies and senses of personhood are inextricably entangled with everyday experiences of mediating *tenshun* and navigating violence. I have also sought, following Spencer (2007) and others (Das 1995; 2007; 2013), to underscore that violence here is not something distinct, removed or out of the ordinary in the lives of these women. Rather it is an “intensification” (Spencer 2007: 120) of everyday processes, structures and relationships within which they are constantly dynamically entangled, and within which there exists significant possibility.

[REDACTED]

Figure 8: Reenu in the tea shop



## Part Two: 'Living Islam' in a Time of Uncertainty

### Chapter 3 - The Path: Islam and the Tablighi Jama'at

It was the middle of the monsoon. The air outside was thick with the rain that began to fall heavily during my conversation with my adopted aunt, Khozana, who I call Kaki, the Bengali for aunt. We were talking about her *Quran*, which she had just retrieved from a large, rusted, blue paint-peeling iron trunk in an interior room, where her most treasured belongings are safely kept. Handled with solemn care, this is a prized possession wrapped in layers of tattered, yellow and white plastic bags that she unfurled reverently in order to display it to me, though as a non-Muslim I was unable to touch.

The *Quran* had a thick, worn black cover which she opened carefully to reveal beautiful pages of green and pink, trimmed in gold. It is almost as old as she is, having been given to her by her parents when she began to attend *madrasa* schooling at the age of four. I asked her whether she had learnt her Arabic in the *madrasa* that still stands in the village, knowing that unusually for a Muslim woman of her age in this part of India, she was both born here and has returned to live in the same village after marriage. “amader maulana diyeche, ei madrasay” [Our *maulana* has given it to me, this *madrasa*] she said, inclining her head in the direction of the village *madrasa* school and using the familiar yet for an outsider, evocative, expression that language or knowledge here is something that is given.

Our talk of her childhood in Tarakhali encouraged her to embark on a liltingly delivered and slightly confused monologue about her deep history and connections to this place. “ami ekhaner meye! eta amar bari, eta amar jonmostan”, [I am this place’s girl! (daughter) This is my home. This is my place of birth]. With gentle prompts, she continued, “amar babar, babar...tar babar! military tey chilo - sadhinotar pore...ki korbe? military ki korte? jao! chole jao! tai ekhane esche e abash korechilo” [My father’s father...his father! He was in the Military. After Independence...What will he do? What could the military do? Go! Go away! So, he came here, and he made a home].

Interweaving some Urdu, she listed the male members of her family who have come before her here, counting them on her bony fingers. “bap, dada...puroush, khandan” before telling me: “joto eshechilo, ekhane chilo - sob amader chilo..tara sob ekhane mathi hoyeche karon mara gaeche...ekhane esheche abash korechilo” [They have come here, they were all here. All of ours were here. They are all here in these fields because they have died...they came here and made a home].

If the so-called origin myths of places or peoples reveal things about pasts, identities and desired representations (Bear 2007b; Carsten 2007), then those of Tarakhali are enigmatic, at times

contradictory, and always forcefully vocalised. In this Muslim village in the mangrove lowlands of West Bengal, the Islamic nature of both the space and its population represents for all parties a primary concern in these articulations.

Kaki's ancestral history, described by her as "ami sudhu golpo jani" [I know only stories], is both unique and at the same time emblematic both of many of the Muslim pasts of those in Tarakhali I would encounter, as well as those across this part of India more widely. There were the ties between Bengali Muslims and the British Colonial rulers; the fracture of Independence and aftershocks of partition; the significance of the jungle spaces that surround us and the places cleared within them to create homes and livelihoods; and, the land itself as a rich repository for ancestral presences, not least as the resting place for their bones.

In what follows I will consider the origins of this settlement, with particular attention to its relationship with Islam. In doing so I will consider the complex and ambiguous relationships people have here with the past, contrasting how people now experience and articulate their faith with how they embody it in their histories and former praxis. I will argue that the increasingly prominent presence of the Tablighi Jama'at is responsible for an alternative sense of what being a Muslim could, and should be, challenging the deeply fluid and family centred origin narratives of this place and calling into question familiar attitudes and practices. Through a focus on the Women's Jama'at, I will show that for women here this is particularly prominent, with the idiom of the path and female moral culpability becoming new focal points for all those living in the village.

The path, the chosen metaphor of the Tablighi Jama'at here when describing women's lives, perhaps due to its comfortable familiarity, may nonetheless be understood as coercive and instructive. The path is straight, clearly outlined by the religious tenets of stricter, reformist Islam, possessing a deliberate and rigid direction, and has sin lying upon either side into which women are extremely likely to tread. With women's lives becoming paths, as opposed to deeply rooted centres, I will assert that there is a building sense of crisis amongst them, stemming from uneasiness within their own faith conjoined with the growing consciousness of their precarious position as Muslims within India more widely underscored in the previous chapters. There is also a performativity, an agency in exploiting the gap between the extraordinary and the everyday. In the chapter that follows I will show how it may be encounters with alternate supernatural Islamic presences that may allow space for development of other narratives.



Figure 9: The *boro masjid* as seen from the roadside

### *Ambiguous Origins*

It is Awa, the daughter of *nani* Ashima, who first tells me of how the village got its name. Entangled with both Khozana and Aliya's families through blood, marriage and the sale of land, her homestead is to the left of the path that winds from the main road through Aliya's verdant garden. She is an elderly though snappily dressed lady, and on the day we talk she is wearing a bright magenta and green sari with a pair of matching magenta spectacles, lending her an incongruously stylish air. She ushers us into the space of her compound whilst fetching two plastic chairs that she places next to the cooking fire, before squatting in the dust and continuing her preparations whilst we talk. As one of the oldest people I've met here, yet distinctly lucid, I ask her when it was that people first arrived here. She replies, "Tarar danga! Tarar pukur, Tarar math, Tara mondol. jhokon jongol chilo tokhon Tara thakur ekhane chilo" [Tara's land! Tara's pond, Tara's field, a Tara temple. When it was jungle then the goddess Tara was here].

Though she is the first to make explicit the reason behind the name of this village and its once ambiguous religious origins, Awa's account is supported and expanded upon by many others that I speak to. There used to exist here a small, earthen Hindu temple to the goddess Tara. This stood adjacent to a large pond, used for the necessary pre-ritual ablutions, and a beautiful field, to both of which the goddess also gave her name. Many recalled stories of people coming to offer prayers for protection here before venturing deeper into the Sundarbans, in a form of devotional religious praxis orientated at safeguarding oneself in the current world well-documented elsewhere in this area (Jalais 2010). Whilst there remains no visible trace of the temple today, it having long been abandoned and broken down, it is from this Hindu goddess that the village takes its name. That this Muslim village is named after a figure from Hinduism seems fitting, given that the very habitation of this ecologically unsettled region has been identified not only as "intrinsically linked with the spread of Islam" (Jalais 2010: 3) in West Bengal, but also the principle site of the encounter between Hinduism and Islam in the region (Eaton 1996; Jalais 2013).

In contrast to other parts of India, neither trade nor conquest brought the Islamic faith to this forested delta. Instead, enigmatic and powerful Sufi saints began to travel to the jungles of Bengal in the 13th Century in pursuit of conquering wild spaces and thereby establishing spiritual legitimacy (Eaton 1996; 2009; Werbner 1996; 2005). Sufism, a mystical and esoteric form of Islam, has long enjoyed an intricate relationship with space, and the cultivation and subsequent control of wild places beyond the religious margins are seen to be demonstrative of intense spiritual potency (Werbner 1996; 2005). Consequently, the movement east by such proselytising pioneers across the Bengal delta is thought to be the primary way in which the Islamic faith entered these remote forests, albeit in a far more fluid form. The situation these charismatic Sufi explorers would have encountered was supremely well

suited for their subsequent appropriation (Asher & Talbot 2006; Dasgupta 2004; Eaton 1996; 2009). A comparative fluidity of religious categories and informal religiosity meant that many would have experienced "no dramatic break from the past" (Dasgupta 2004a: 38) in their embrace of these Islamic individuals.

This initial assimilation was followed by a surge in Islamic adherence in the two and a half decades from the early 16th century. Mughal desire to render "legible" (Scott 1998) densely forested places along with their inhabitants led many Muslim entrepreneurs to venture into far-flung regions and introduce settled agriculture, for which they were handsomely remunerated. Many of these were the same charismatic Sufi individuals who had already begun to install themselves in such inhospitable terrains. As such, the "overlapping frontiers" (Eaton 2009: 379) of agrarian development and economic gain conjoined to establish a religious frontier, in the form of the mosques, shrines and other religious sites constructed by the pioneers in these newly settled areas.

The new principles of agriculture and Islam were thus simultaneously explored and embraced, with "Islamic conceptions of prophethood, divinity, and cosmology....connected to processes of geographic, political and economic change" (Eaton 2009: 376). Consequently, the agrarian cultivators often became immortalised in local belief systems as "vivid mythico-historical figures" (Eaton 1996: 207) that were nonetheless in their essence seen to be Bengali (Jalais 2010). The fluid nature of the "folk Bengali cosmology" (Eaton 1996: 302-303) permitted a unique capacity for these figures to be understood as powerful harbingers of change whilst also "genuinely local" (Eaton 1996: 303).

This rich legacy of Sufi origins in Bengal as proposed by Eaton, and the religious fluidity evocatively explored by Jalais, have left distinct traces on the current religious landscape. Charismatic religious figures continue to populate these areas, though they are no longer Sufi *pirs* but *gunnins*, or Islamic medicine men. These spiritually potent and often religiously educated individuals are sought out by a diversity of faiths for their healing powers. Skilled in the preparation of *tabiz* protection amulets, the concoction of curative draughts and in more extreme cases, protection spells and exorcisms, they offer a spiritually imbued alternative to the Western medicine dished out in crowded hospital waiting rooms.

There also remains devotion in these parts, including in Tarakhali, to the ambiguous local deistic figure of Bonbibí. A goddess with a Muslim name, venerated by Hindus, Muslims and Christians alike, she is viewed as the protector of this area's inhabitants, particularly those venturing deeper into the jungles of the Sundarbans having been "sent by Allah to save people from tigers" (Jalais 2010: 12). It was by one of my most enigmatic collaborators, herself possessing healing powers and the

ability to cast spells, that I was told stories of Bonbibi and her enchanting of the forest that had been passed down to her by her grandmother.

Finally, the reverence of space as associated with elements of Sufism remains consistent here. For my collaborators in Tarakhali, the land around them was far more than a resource and was instead a significant source of identity and stability, as well as a powerful repository of myth and religion that had the power to impinge upon their lives. As will become clear, space remains a constant in their vivid depictions of the past, their embattled Islamic identities in the present, and the visions they have of their futures.

There are however also differences. In spite of possible spiritual roots in forms of Sufi Islam, and in contrast to large parts of Northern India and Pakistan (Bellamy 2011; Ewing 1997; Heitmeyer 2011; Werbner 2005) there are noticeably no *dargahs* here; the tombs of powerful Sufi saints regarded as religiously potent spaces and visited by both Muslims and Hindus alike. The nearest one of significance for my collaborators is Furfura Sharif, some 150 kilometres away to the west of the city of Kolkata. Likewise, whilst there are *gunnins* there are no *pirs* here; the spiritual masters of Sufism who are seen as living saints, around whom form devoted followings and constant streams of visitors seeking spiritual guidance or cures for physical or mental afflictions (Ewing 1997).

A possible explanation for this absence is that the dense jungles that Eaton refers to could have been other, less remote parts of the vast Bengal delta, as the islands of the Sundarbans remain largely inaccessible except by boat, and this island of [REDACTED] on which Tarakhali can be found was similarly unconnected up until just a few years ago. However, prominent mythical figures such as Bonbibi and Shah Jangali seem to suggest a deeper Islamic presence here (Jalais 2010). It is thus more likely that given the environmental volatility of the region, the legacies of individuals or traces of structures would have been easily erased with the onslaught of weather and the passing of time.

Within Tarakhali there are also alternative theories as to how Islam emerged. Abu Ahmed, the *imam* of the smaller of the two mosques in the village, moves his slender fingers through his wispy beard as he sets out his interpretation of how the faith first came to West Bengal. He describes a voyage of clerically minded Sunni pilgrims from Saudi Arabia, landing on the banks of the Hooghly river in Kolkata before making their way through the district of South 24 Parganas we find ourselves in and further east into Bangladesh.

Though there exists evidence of the role of Arab traders bringing the Islamic faith to South Asia as early as the 8th Century (Metcalf 2009a: 1), I have struggled to find support or textual verification for his theory. Undoubtedly, many of the *pirs* who are credited with establishing an Islamic frontier

within this region would have journeyed from Persia and elsewhere in the Middle East (Eaton 1996) whilst the rich overlays of Islamic history in this formerly Mughal dominated part of India have left resounding effects. Consequently, his explanation may be the transformation of the Middle Eastern origins into explicitly Arabic ones, a fascinating illustration of the burgeoning awareness of the hierarchies within the wider Islamic world amongst Muslims here in Tarakhali and a desire to align their own narratives with the perceived pinnacle of the religion; the birthplace of the prophet and the geographic heart of the faith.

The attentiveness to a wider Islamic identity and the privileging of this connection over local, more ambiguous ties has been an ongoing process here. It may perhaps be seen as beginning with the Bengal region's first partition along religious lines in 1905. Primarily reflective of British colonial sentiments regarding separating Hindu and Muslim interests, the event was nonetheless preceded by a regional heightening of communal distinctions. This was due to the entwining of religious ideology and class-based agrarian resistance, manifest in Muslim peasant movements invoking principles of *jihad* paralleled by Hindu agriculturalist agitations deploying religious symbolism (Chakrabarty 1998; Chatterjee 1982; Metcalf 2009a). Though rescinded six years later, this initial partition had reflected an escalating "sense that personal identity was linked to public identity as a 'Muslim' or a 'Hindu'" (Metcalf 2009a: 24) in Bengal, as was increasingly the case elsewhere in India.

In 1947, the year of *shadinota* (independence) followed by partition, brutal violence and mass migration rocked the region. Over the subsequent decades, more than 6 million Hindu refugees from East Bengal crossed the border into India (Chatterji 2007: 2) with an estimated two million Muslims journeying in the opposite direction. Indicative of the "inevitably incomplete" (Chatterji 2007: 159) geographical partition along a religious divide, the line of partition cut through households, families and communities with ineffective and devastating consequences for those suddenly consigned to either side of a national frontier. On both sides of the Bengal border, belonging quickly became defined solely in terms of religion (Sengupta 2003).

In West Bengal, Muslims who remained behind through choice, or more often, circumstance, became an "exposed and vulnerable minority" (Chatterji 2007:165). Acquiescence to the majority was particularly prevalent in the domain of Islamic religious rituals that became increasingly threatened as unjustifiable and somehow anti-national "claims to public space" (Chatterji 2007: 177). Escalating tensions led many previously cosmopolitan, city dwelling Muslims to leave urban centres in a trend "contrary to the norm" (Chatterji 2007: 192), migrating to the countryside where the threat of communal violence appeared less imminent.

It is in this more tempestuous period that it seems that Tarakhali first became inhabited. How did people arrive in this strange and, as will become evident they believe, enchanted landscape? Many of my collaborators told me that their families had moved “up” (Jalais 2010) from deeper in the jungles of the Sundarbans. They described the desire to leave behind the challenges posed by the shifting tides, the need for building dams to fortify their lands and homes against flooding, the constant fight against the environment. Some mentioned a terrible storm, not dissimilar to cyclone Aila in 2009, that reportedly destroyed houses and livelihoods, driving their ancestors to the relative safety of this larger and less exposed island in the archipelago.

Certain families, Khozana’s among them, trace links back to Kolkata. This is the perhaps normally counter-intuitive urban to rural migration of Muslims after partition, made in fear of communal violence, that historical sources corroborate (Chatterji 2007). Many of their forefathers are said to have worked for the colonial administration or the army, a fact not inconceivable given the preponderance of Muslims employed by the colonisers due to the prevailing assumption that they would be more compliant and more martial; a characteristically divisive move on behalf of the British. When they were released from service, or after independence, depending on whose account one is listening to, they claim they were told to go – “jao! chole jao!”. Those who chose to come here had been stationed in the area previously and were thus aware of the availability of vast amounts of unsettled land. The sometime accompanying assertion that they were offered these tracts of land to settle after completion of their service as gifts remain slightly more dubious, in contrast to what has been identified elsewhere as the Indian state’s resettlement of marginal groups in hostile environments (Jalais 2005; Zehmisch 2017).

Entangled in these claims to land are those who were formerly part of the large landowning *zamindari* families. These are those whose allegiance to either the Muslim rulers of Bengal or their British successors saw them rewarded with vast pieces of land that would be portioned out and rented in a chain system that preserved their wealth and dominance whilst crippling those on the bottom rung. These vast holdings were finally wrested from them in the years after independence and apportioned amongst those in need, though in practice the neutrality of the criteria used to undertake this redistribution remains questionable.

Finally, proximity to the Bangladesh border has also had its effect. Many have told me that large numbers of families in Tarakhali came over from what is now Bangladesh, both prior and subsequent to the Liberation War that tore the country apart in 1971. Those who are more forthright, eagerly choosing to make ripples in the pools of gossip that swirl constantly around village life, confide in hushed whispers that some continue to do so, bribing the easily persuadable border security guards



and sneaking over to join families here in the belief that life within the Indian state may somehow be easier and more economically prosperous (Van Schendel 2005).

The past in Tarakhali is remembered with longing and comforting distance in equal measure. There is the quintessential sense of hardship yet a resilient purity or idealism which weave together to form the fabrics of nostalgia. Descriptions of what it used to be like here are almost always framed in terms of the land, and could be easily interchanged with their descriptions of *jannah*, or paradise.

One fragment of history that gains consensus amongst my interlocutors is that where the village stands today was formerly a jungle largely devoid of human inhabitants as recently as 100 years ago. This is my own temporal framework, as time here is rarely, if ever, meted out in the familiar and comfortable units of the Gregorian calendar. Instead, it is “kichu somoy shadinotar age” [some time before Independence] or the time of my middle-aged conversation partners’ “father’s fathers”, leading me to make my own best estimations. Expansive colonial records on India are of little use either, with what fragments exist in the District Gazetteers offering only “frustratingly brief” (Jalais 2010: 4) glimpses of the local population.

Maryam, now a great-grandmother with a wide and kind face with lazy, milky blue eyes, always wears one of the two mustard yellow saris she owns, often offset with a tattered plum-coloured blouse. On this scorching November morning we have forced her to sit on a plastic chair whilst we take the mat on the floor, and her small wizened feet swing delightedly above the cracked earth as she talks. She doesn’t know how old she is, though a choice made long ago means her ID card says she is 63 years old. Piecing together scraps of what she tells me and her ageing face, I estimate her to be at least a decade and a half older. A few years after she arrived here as a young bride many years ago and having never had any form of ID before, she was taken by her husband’s family to register for a voter ID card. When she told the officials in charge of registration that she didn’t know her age, they simply told her she could choose.

The recollections of women arriving in Tarakhali shortly after marriage are often the most striking, possessing both the critical eyes of outsiders conjoined with the life-shifting significance of an irreversible journey marking the boundary line between childhood and adult female responsibility. “rasta chilo na, boro masjid chilo na, dokano chilo na! sudhu jongol chilo” [There was no road, there was no big mosque, there were no shops! Just jungle] Maryam says, laughing. “kintu, ki jongol chilo...baish-ta narkle gach chilo ekhane” [But what jungle it was. There were 22 coconut trees here] she says excitedly, rising carefully and moving across the homestead to where a few trees still stand. “sob phol gach chilo - narkle gach, am gach, kola gach, chikoo gach...ekhon...ekhon na” [There were all kinds of fruit trees here - coconut trees, mango trees, banana trees, chikoo trees...now...now

there's not] she says, plucking a chikoo fruit from the tree, telling me to keep it safely in my kitchen where after a few days it will ripen and demand to be eaten.

Regardless of where it is they trace their arrival here from, the memories and aural histories passed-down from those who were in Tarakhali from its beginnings as a settlement are notably consistent. The landscape was very different, thickly forested as with the islands further “down” (Jalais 2010) in the Sundarbans. However, the relative protection of this island and the inland location of Tarakhali mean it was an abundant jungle less ravaged by the weather and the tides. There were towering coconut palms, squat but generous bananas, mangoes, smaller shrubs, the leaves, roots and bark of which were often eaten or used for medicinal purposes. Vines, smaller plants, leaves “sobuj chilo, sobuj chilo, sobuj chilo” [It was green, it was green, it was green]. There were also many ponds that today still compose this riverine landscape. Then they were clearer and sweeter, less encumbered by supporting such a large population. They were also teeming with fish that the few inhabitants could enjoy with a luxurious frequency of particular significance for Bengalis. Densely forested, there were none of the vast open spaces of cultivation that dominate today. Wild animals thrived in these parts, and though today there remain pockets of jungle, there are no longer any tigers.

This was not the case when some of my eldest collaborators were growing up in the village. Nusair Islam is a wizened grandfather aged seventy-seven who runs one of two small tailoring businesses on the roadside in Tarakhali. He is one of my few regular male interlocutors, his self-professed wisdom, easy going nature and advanced years meaning our relationship is an uncomplicated one of friendly ease: “amar boyosh satattar, tai ami sob jani!”, he tells me, [My age is seven-seven, so I know everything!]. Sitting in the sunshine outside his shop front, he is clad solely in a pale blue, checked *lungi* wrapped around his gnarled and lean form whilst he offers a toothy smile when recalling his childhood here. “tokhon...shokal bela manousher khaowar jono kichu chilo na” [at that time, there was nothing for people to eat for breakfast]. He goes on to describe the various plants that they would go and hunt for: “sapla, salu, shak, kulmi shak” “Life was very difficult, but slowly over time things began to improve”, “aste, aste, aste, aste, aste...onek poriborton” [slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly...a lot of change].

This conjunction between abundance and hardship inflects all memories, including those of how the space itself became inhabitable. In the same conversation that I began with, the language used by Kaki when describing the ‘home making’ of her ancestors is demonstrative of the violence with which this settlement was wrought. “bagh kete, pasu kete, jongol kete” [They killed tigers, they killed wild animals, they cleared the jungle], she says. It is worth noting that the literal translation of ‘kete’ is to cut or to slice.

One of the most consistently iterated points, usually accompanied by an enthusiastic gesture, was the vast amount of unpopulated space that existed here previously. With only a handful of families present in the beginning, the settlement was small and intimate, dominated by expanses of jungle. This is in contrast to today, where families exist in close proximity, squabbling over ancestral land and forcibly sharing in one another's business.

There exists strong similarity here between depictions of the past with the imaginations of *jannah* or paradise for those of the Muslim faith. Verdant abundance and the generous embrace of the land are such prominent themes in these images, a thread that seems to tie the elusive memories of the past with the similarly intangible imaginations of the future, as will be discussed further in Chapter 7. There is a further fantastical element that accents this landscape and the village's collective mythology. Behind Sara's house is a small tangle of jungle in which stands a vast and ancient tree. Unremarkable to the untrained eye, this tree is thought by all who live here to be both unique and powerful. No-one knows what the tree is called, though here it too has also taken its name from the goddess Tara: *Tara gach*.

It has been here since the village's beginning, perhaps even further back, at least before the time of "Hamilton Sahib". When it blossoms, the flowers are multiple and tiny, and a remarkable jet-black colour: "choto, choto, choto... e black ekdom!". Further, when people in the past have tried to cut into the trunk, blood has spilled out from the bark. I am told that it has not flowered in many years, although all here still believe that should one cut into it then the blood would still flow. With evident pride, people tell me that botanists and plant enthusiasts have travelled here from all over the world in an attempt to verify the tree's identity, though none have been able to do so. As will become clear, the land on which Tarakhali has been built and the jungles that still surround it are thought here to be imbued with powerful and deeply Islamic potency. It is against this backdrop that Islam is lived here today, under a building sense of scrutiny.

### *Islam in Tarakhali*

The *boro masjid* catches one's eye from the roadside. Far different from its original incarnation many decades ago, it is now a vast and elegant building of white marble and pale pink and green interiors with electric lighting, ceiling fans and a large, open space attached to the back in order to accommodate the groups of Tablighis that arrive in the village every Tuesday. Standing calm and majestic, it feels quietly incongruous among the ramshackle buildings of cracked earth that squat in the encompassing foliage.

The smaller *choto masjid* is physically far more in keeping with surroundings. It is a stubby, crumbling building, with a small courtyard in front into which worshippers spill during busy times such as Friday prayers or religious holidays. This smaller mosque was built around 50 years ago, some ten or fifteen years after the original *boro masjid* was constructed, when as the population of the village grew it was deemed necessary to offer an additional place of worship for the increasing population, particularly for those whose homes or sites of daily labour lay deep in the fields that yawn back from the roadside. Even today, on hearing the familiar *azaan* lilt across the fields, many will stop working and offer prayers where they are, or alternatively remain in their homes to do so. The women will always pray at home, as is customary here.

Having observed both *masjids* and the behaviour of their patrons closely, there is no discernible difference in the quotidian practices of their faith: the *azaan* sounds at the same times each day; the type of *salat*, the physical movements that accompany prayers, performed does not differ; they fast on Muharram; and both celebrate *Qurbani Eid* with equal tenacity, with the kind of animal being slaughtered depending solely on the wealth of the family concerned. During *ramzan mas*, the Muslim holy month, there are variances in people's commitment to fasting irrespective of which mosque they attend, as one might expect in any Muslim community. Upon the month's completion all of the men from Tarakhali offer the *Eid-ul-Fitr* prayer in a vast open space nearby commonly referred to as "eider math", the Eid field, where Muslim males from every surrounding community travel great distances in order to gather.

Porous boundaries exist between the assemblies. This means that if someone is in another part of the village for work or socialising, they may offer *namaz* at the *masjid* different to their habitual place of worship. Having been present for several funerals during my time in Tarakhali, and the associated rites held at each of the *masjids*, these events were shared, communal village practices in which all took part. Weddings were similar, guests were always a pan-assembly, jumbled mix of family, neighbours and closest friends, in typically Indian huge, unmanageable numbers. Children from families of both the *boro masjid* and the *choto masjid* all attend the single *madrassa* in the village.

The women in Tarakhali further blur any distinctions. All dress similarly, with all but a handful choosing the sari as opposed to the *salwar kameez*, and none sporting the *hijab* or the *burqa* when at home or moving around within the considerable confines of the village. A few will wear these garments when making trips outside, although many do not at any point, only acknowledging the prescriptions of the Islamic dress code with a hastily pulled sari end over their heads at the sound of the *azaan*. The only women's prayer meeting held every Sunday afternoon in one of the buildings alongside the *boro masjid* is attended by fluctuating numbers of women from a diverse group of families in the village. Yet there does exist one significant difference between these two spaces of

worship and their fluid congregations: the *boro masjid* has become encapsulated within the vast and sprawling networks of the Tablighi Jama'at.

Originating in India almost 100 years ago, the Tablighi Jama'at has expanded to become arguably the most pervasive and widespread organisation of Islamic reformism across the world (Sikand 1999). From distinctive male clothing of white *pyjamas* ending above the ankles and pale blue or white *kurtas*, to an emphasis on simple and humble ways of living, adherents to Tablighi ideology accept both an inward and an outward reorientation in their lives (Metcalf 2009b). Not only do they seek a distancing or rejection from the neighbours and societies that they live amongst, they also simultaneously accept an obligation to try and teach receptive Muslim others about the benefits of such a stance, stemming from the founder's belief that "the very act of teaching others would best teach the teachers" (Metcalf 1998: 109). In doing so they embrace a much wider network of fellow adherents to the movement, a focus meaning I was told proudly that people not just from West Bengal, and India more widely, but all over the world now come to the *boro masjid* as part of these circumnavigating networks<sup>15</sup>.

The first religious building in Tarakhali has thus been transformed over the past decades. A steady trickle of funding brought by the association with the Tablighi Jama'at has resulted in a significant modernisation from its formerly humble and earthen incarnation whilst encompassment within the networks of the organisation mean a regular flow of outsiders in and out of the village. In contrast to the buildings of reformist Islamic groups elsewhere (Janson 2011) this space has become a visible embodiment of the significant though quietly distributed wealth (Jasani 2008) and prestige of this movement as opposed to embodying the worldly renouncement of materiality. Consequently, many here now proudly, or in some cases cynically, refer to it as the *dami masjid* - the rich or expensive mosque.

My eldest collaborators, those such as Nusair, recall offering their first *namaz* in this building many, many years earlier, long before the arrival of the Tablighi Jama'at. However, they would stress this was a time when the religious prescriptions of Islam were adhered to far less strictly, with the onus placed instead on one's conduct in life as opposed to the visibility of routines of religious adherence. People prayed, but more importantly - lived - piously, in a sense embodying more fully a Muslim lifestyle - "musalmaner jibon" - though being far less well versed in the intricacies of Islamic doctrine.

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<sup>15</sup> Despite these rumours I never encountered anyone from overseas during my time in Tarakhali.

There was thus an interesting tension when I would ask elderly interlocutors whether things were more or less religious today, with people typically offering a cryptic response such as “age aro bhalo chilo...kintu ajke aro shickeche” [Before things were better, but today more has been learnt] or “age manoush khub kom jane...kintu sobai bhalo chilo...ajke...” [before people knew a lot less...but everyone was good...today...]. As will become clear in what follows, there exists a pervasive sentiment that although over time people here have been ‘given’ the knowledge by the more learned Tablighi Jama’ati outsiders of how they should and should not behave, perhaps previously they more intuitively and effortlessly embodied the principles of Islam.

The day is now more punctuated with piety. Some here will rise at dawn with the *azaan* for the first prayer of the day. Ablutions are performed quietly and carefully in the still and silent ponds, or for those praying in the *boro masjid* at the new concrete bank of hand-pump water taps set just back from the road, to the right of the path that leads to the mosque. Some do perform all five of the *salats* each day, though this number remains stubbornly low. The midday *Salat-al-Zuhr* is one that for many, particularly women for whom mornings are a frantic exercise in domestic labour, is regularly neglected due to its unfortunate midday timing. However the afternoon and sunset prayers are widely observed, with women often quietly excusing themselves to pray as we chat after lunch, as is the evening *Salat al-‘isha*.

The rules for Friday prayers are slightly different. Mubarak, Kaki’s youngest son whose name<sup>16</sup> belies his often difficult and fractious nature, explained the strict attendance required one Friday whilst he was dawdling childishly around the home in order to avoid visiting the mosque. Attendance at this weekly gathering is closely monitored he said, and should one fail to show up three weeks in a row, a visit from the *imam* and a stern reprimand will be issued along with an instruction to ensure attendance going forward. This strictness is in contrast to what used to be a relaxed approach to Islamic praxis here and is by him, and his mother Khozana, explicitly associated with the arrival in the village of the Tablighi Jama’at.

Islamic rituals and events are also now taken more seriously whilst changing in significance. Such is the onus on adhering to a fast during *ramzan mas* irrespective of personal circumstances that two elderly people died during the two that I was present for in Tarakhali, and the *imam* of the *boro masjid* himself became very unwell. The most significant religious holiday here, *Eid-al-Fitr*, remains the favourite day in the year of all of my collaborators, although there is now an additional emphasis on extensive praying during the morning with the celebrations confined to the late afternoon. *Eid-al-adha*, celebrated just over two months later is also enjoyed, though is seen as much less significant

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<sup>16</sup> Mubarak means blessed in Arabic.

and given the poverty of most here the number of animals slaughtered and meat shared out amongst the community is fairly small. However, in spite of this many have now begun to fast for one or three of the days before this second Eid, in a new and increasingly pious show of adherence.

Another religious day of significance has always been the *Shab-e-Barat*, a lesser known Islamic festival occurring before Ramadan each year. The day is associated with the capacity to ask Allah for forgiveness for sins, and the honouring of one's deceased family members. Consequently, special prayers are offered in the mosque in the evening and then there are night time visits to the graveyards of ancestors where candles are placed on graves and food is distributed. Kaki particularly enjoyed this holiday, as an elderly and widowed woman she was one of the privileged few females allowed to travel to the graveyard with the men, and to serve them food, a role prohibited for the majority of women. However, she revealed in our discussion with Mubarak that her ability to participate in this favourite of holidays was under threat, with increasing pressure from the Tablighi Jama'at to bar women from the celebrations in keeping with stricter Islamic principles that forbid females from visiting graveyards under all circumstances.

This traditional holiday is also increasingly being overlooked in favour of a different one. The annual gathering in which palely clad streams of Tablighis arrive in their hundreds to Tarakhali and spend a day labouring to improve the mosque or associated buildings, praying together and listening to sermons. I eagerly anticipated this day as one in which to learn more about the elusive group, their history in this village and to gain an understanding of where it figured within a wider, religious imagination. Nonetheless, the day remained one of the most frustrating and upsetting of my fieldwork, in which friends and collaborators shunned me, I was aggressively moved away from the mosque outside of which I had sat comfortably in conversation just days earlier, and was told I could not even speak to the men far away from the proceedings down the road.

In the presence of these outsiders, those in Tarakhali were far more concerned with the maintenance of the strict boundaries and gendered divisions that are associated with reformist movements in South Asia (Robinson 2008) though arguably less so with the Tablighi Jama'at (Metcalf 1998) and that I had nonetheless up until that point found to be distinctly absent in the village. There appeared to exist a sharp divergence between how the idealised adherence to these Islamic prescriptions should be embodied and the relaxed and friendly "hostly" approach that typically trumped any religious concerns. The remarkable power of the presence of outsiders to heighten such normally dormant or relaxed attitudes was thus something extremely confronting.

Perhaps predictably, such transformations have been accompanied by an increased attention to what sect or branch of Islam people here belong to. Amongst the majority, there existed a pervasive

vagueness regarding their particular sect or branch of Islam, something quite unusual both in India and the Islamic world more widely, where factionalism within the religion is seen to be generally speaking on the rise (Didier 2004; Janasi 2008; Janson 2011). When I gently pushed Abu Ahmed the *imam* of the *choto masjid* in our first conversation as to the sect or branch of Islam followed by those in the village, he told me they were Hanafi. In our subsequent conversations, he told me that they were Deobandi, as he regarded himself to be, having studied in a *madrassa* in Uttar Pradesh where this school of thought is dominant. In spite of this, when asking this question in over 100 households in the village, not a single individual identified themselves with either of these descriptors. All simply said: “We are Muslim”. When pressed, there were flickers of uncertainty, and in some cases sparks of anger, as though unsure and ill at ease about what they were expected to say.

Association with the Tablighi Jama’at has undoubtedly brought about positive material changes in Tarakhali. The vast mosque is far more spacious and accommodating place within which to worship, something highlighted by its comparison to the dilapidated *choto masjid*. On the whole, people enjoyed the steady flow of strangers in and out of the village who brought with them news, unfamiliar teachings and money to spend in the small shops along the roadside (although murmured protestations circulated about the food contributions and accommodation which they were firmly requested to provide to them for free) and there was also undoubtedly a sense of pride in this connection to a global Islamic organisation.

Yet perhaps most significant, and most challenging, are the behavioural changes and the shifting ideological alterations that have accompanied these benefits. There is an increasing sense of scrutiny over what it is to be a good Muslim here, particularly as a woman. It has seen the arrival of the types of female Muslim coverings associated with Islam in other parts of the world, such as the *hijab*, the *niqab*, the *chador* and the *burqa*. There has been the introduction of a women’s jama’at meeting every Sunday, with a female only *madrassa* building under construction the last time I was in the village in July 2016.

Aside from family visiting from elsewhere, the primary outsiders to now spend time in Tarakhali are the influx of Tablighis who arrive every Tuesday morning in time for the *Salat-al-Suhr* prayers, whiling away the afternoon and evening in the village before moving on the next day. This weekly event highlights the association of this *masjid* and its congregation to a wider network of mosques across West Bengal, India and globally: a chain of pilgrimage routes through which individuals circulate, teaching the correct forms of Islam to their fellow believers in keeping with the Tablighi ideology (Metcalf 1998).



These outsiders, in their uniform of starched white *kurta pyjamas*, and the ideas which they hold, are noticeably different. They draw attention to ‘un-Islamic’ practices that were formerly daily habits. They play a role in controlling the flow of news and information into the village, prioritising information useful for suggesting pan-Islamic solidarity and questioning the safety and security of all Muslims in India. The organisation’s deeper links to a darker and more deliberate attempt to solidify Muslim adherence around the world though little talked about in Tarakhali, nonetheless became evident during my time in the village through a burgeoning awareness of tropes significant of Muslim suffering or radicalisation such as Israel and ISIS.

Though their presence is seen as a sign that this dusty and deprived locale is somehow special and important, the flows of people, ideas and information are leading to increasing uncertainty amongst the village’s inhabitants, unsure of the pressing demands to behave and act in keeping with these new found Muslim ideals.

### *The Women’s Jama’at*

On the Sunday I first attended the women’s prayer meeting, I began with lunch at Kaki’s house. She fussed around me, trying to force more rice onto my plate and shouting at me for not taking another egg, in a simultaneously aggressive, playful and motherly fashion familiar, I am sure, to many ethnographers. She had bathed and washed her hair in preparation for the afternoon, and it hung in a slick black and greying sheen down her back whilst she carefully arranged her emerald coloured blouse and bright blue sari. Her granddaughter Shamsia glided around excitedly in her turquoise headscarf singing softly, trying desperately to admire her reflection in the cracked mirror hanging from the mud wall.

At last we departed, concerned that we may be late as I had told them it had already gone three o’clock which was when the meeting was due to begin. We picked up Nura and Radhia along the way, the latter of whom was extremely pleased with her small, black *chador* covering. We reached the building, only to discover that we were the first to arrive, in a trick typical of village time-keeping. The inside was painted a pale green, with a concrete floor and *purdah* style windows that allowed for snatches of breeze inside the already hot room, as the ceiling fans remained stubbornly off during the usual afternoon power cut. We sat on straw mats on the floor and waited for the room to fill up, which it did gradually with around fifty women.

Their ages ranged from little girls as young as Radhia, to the elderly and wizened, led in slowly with the support of relatives and gingerly propped against the concrete walls. Middle-aged women, comfortable in their largeness, lowered their bulky sari clad frames onto the floor and began to

whisper. Many younger women were wearing *salwar kameez* in bright patterns and designs, some only visible in flashes under the black *chador* covering placed on top. All had covered their heads with their saris, a scarf or in certain cases a proper *hijab* or a *niqab*, worn with a certain kind of pride.

I felt as though I was just about passing muster in my three-quarter length black *kurta*, trousers and unfamiliar headscarf, when a woman took it upon herself to discipline me for my red toe nail polish, telling me it is explicitly forbidden in the *Quran*, which though no scriptural expert I felt to be slightly improbable. Many women were wearing black *chadors* and *burqas* that they didn't remove, even once inside, in spite of the heat and the deeply familiar female company. A woman from the village who had entered and made her way to the front began to read aloud from the *Quran*, cradling the book in a pair of thick black gloves and wearing a pair of matching socks of the piety variety I have only ever seen in the Middle East. She kept them on for the entire meeting, surrounded by an assembly that could only contain her family, her friends and her neighbours.

These were clothes that I had never previously seen within the village. Daily, women wore saris, with occasionally some of the teenagers favouring *salwar kameez*. On special occasions such as Durga Pujo, Eid and Weddings, women wore saris, albeit with far more make-up, jewellery and of a far better quality than they would typically wear each day. Even when leaving the village, the majority would not sport these garments: girls wore their uniforms to school unencumbered by coverings of piety; women visited the bazaar and government offices dressed up, though not with any Islamic coverings; and it was only very occasionally one would see a black clad figure by the roadside waiting for transport typically with a partner, and a suitcase, thus likely to be embarking on a long journey.

A hush fell as the speaker arrived in the room next door, hidden from our assembled company by a screen. Every week, a different faceless authority from the village including the two *imams*, *maulanas* (learned Muslim males) or visiting Tablighis would deliver a sermon, the predominant focus of which was women's piety. These men would mostly be familiar to these women; neighbours, perhaps extended family, friends of their husbands. In a day-to-day context they would encounter one another in this village, exchanging greetings, having tea in one another's homes. Thus, what follows is a strange intensification of existing relationships in which admonishment comes from familiar, usually friendly sources, in contrast to the "warmth, gentleness and simplicity" (Metcalf 1998: 112) of such female focused Tablighi sermons observed elsewhere in India.

Over the next hour and a half, I struggled to absorb what was being said in a firm, rapidly delivered mixture of Bengali, Arabic and Urdu. There was a clear focus on the ways in which women deport themselves, including strict instructions on how to dress appropriately and maintain *purdah*, raise

one's children in accordance with the correct Islamic principles and the female obligation to manage a household to exacting standards, broadly characteristic of the focus when it comes to women of Islamic reformist movements (Marsden 2008; Robinson 2008).

There were many lessons – *path* in Bengali – delivered over the course of those 90 minutes, with daily scenarios explicitly woven back into particular *suras* (chapters) from the *Quran* or passages from the *Hadith*. There was also a similar sounding repeated refrain or phrase that I became aware of, confirming its repetition later on when I re-listened to my audio recording: *pat* - path and *pap* - sin - easy words to pick out against the harshness of Arabic to an untrained ear, and the rossogolla sweetness of Bengali. A woman's life was described continuously as a narrow, winding path, like those in the village, upon which sin lies waiting on either side. Women are far more likely to commit sinful acts than men and must consider where they put each foot - *pa* - carefully.

This image of women's lives as a path has been observed in other contexts of female encounters with reformist Islamic teachings (Haniffa 2008; Huq 2008). Over time, this expression would become familiar both from the other *madrassa* meetings that I attended, and in the conversations around being a good Muslim and piety that I had with my interlocutors. There were some more subtle themes talked about such as the pan-global Islamic brotherhood, the significance of family and looking after children, something understood as a woman's "primary Tablighi role" (Metcalf 2009b: 243) and the need to live a Muslim life, and to avoid the kinds of *desher jinnish* (folk / customary practices) they may have become used to. There was a final strange assertion of the need to be aware of intelligence officers trying to infiltrate the village, something that I had been told by others here<sup>17</sup>. It ended with a prayer towards the West.

During the sermon, some listened avidly. Many dozed against the wall and others muttered quietly amongst themselves, asking for elucidation or explanation around a particular point or catching up on news and gossip. A handful got up and left half way through, as I was repeatedly told that I was able to do should I wish to. There was an unscripted call and response type element to the proceedings that was reminiscent to me of some African or American churches, with the congregation nodding and agreeing with what is being said, "hai hai, hai, thik bolche", [yes, yes, yes, that's true]. There existed a relaxed intimacy between the women, who took turns to fan each other lazily, snatching the fans from other's hands when they wished, whispering, giggling, poking those falling asleep awake and admonishing those such as Kaki, who was more interested in tickling little Radhia than the words

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<sup>17</sup> During my time in Tarakhali I was told by several different men, including Nusair and Nura's sons, that there were Indian CID (Central Intelligence Division) officers attempting to infiltrate the village in order to spy on Muslims. Often, they identified these people as the homeless vagrants that sometimes passed through the village. This was something mentioned in the women's prayer meetings but never spoken about by the women themselves, nor was it something I could ever find any evidence of.

coming from behind the screen. Nura kept her eyes on me at all times, as if to gauge my reaction to what was being said.

As we emerged blinking into the scorching afternoon heat, I stopped and spoke to many of the women, who begun to unfurl themselves from their black cocoons, slipping off their headscarves and peeling back their *chadors*, in an unexpected inversion of vestural piety. They asked what I thought of the meeting, whether I was able to understand, and told me eagerly that I should come every Sunday. Over the following days, I would see the same women around the village, clad in saris, children hanging from their waists as they sloshed water from wells or slapped clothes against the steps of a pond whilst engaged in raucous gossip. I would meet some of them later on during fieldwork, and they would welcome me into their homes with warm smiles and welcoming expressions, asking how I had been since they last saw me, and slowly it would dawn upon me that there was a familiarity in their voice, or posture, though when I had first met them their faces must have been concealed.

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This weekly women's prayer meeting is one of many changes to the religious and social landscape of the village during the past decade. Its performative aspects, in which Islamic piety is rehearsed and acted out with varying degrees of commitment and success, is I believe emblematic of a deeper sense of self-reflection and self-doubt amongst the women who live here.

The women's *madrassa* meeting described above, and those I subsequently attended, were replete with strange inversions of expected Muslim practices. There was the arrival in, and keeping on of the unfamiliar religiously concealing garments, only to remove them outside once the sermon was over and wander home in saris with neighbours and friends. With these items typically intended here to conceal women from the eyes of male others from outside the village, their deployment in an interior space surrounded by deeply familiar females is both unusual and intriguing. There was similarly the complete spectrum with respect to how seriously the meetings were participated in. In contrast to the solemnness and dedication described amongst women's prayer groups in differing contexts (Haniffa 2008; Huq 2008; Mahmood 2005) in Tarakhali women leave, others fall asleep and many simply spend the time whispering to one another or daydreaming. How are we to interpret their attendance and (lack of) commitment?

These oddities were particularly striking given the situation was one freely entered into. No woman ever claimed to have been encouraged or coerced into attending, and many women I was close with did not attend, including Aksha, Aliya, Tabina and Sara, citing too much work, or an absence of interest. Illustrative that these women were not somehow outliers, Aliya was, as discussed in the preceding chapter, one of the most religious and well-respected women in the village. Further, the

wife of the *imam* of the *boro masjid* herself never attended, citing far too much work looking after her husband and six young, boisterous children.

Perhaps for some there existed the desire to begin to cultivate the naturally occurring dispositions in keeping with Tablighi ideology (Mahmood 2005). For others, the meetings may have represented freedom from household drudgery and the reclamation of a slice of “*amader nijer somoy*” [our own time] as performing *namaz* was often associated with, and has been observed of participation by women in prayer meetings elsewhere (Jasani 2008).

Metcalf has identified large female group gatherings such as these as notable, even amongst Islamic reformist organisations: “One striking aspect of women’s participation is in fact the opportunity Tablighi offers for women to congregate” (Metcalf 1998: 112). Many seemed to believe that simply by being there amongst these many other women in that space one could derive benefit, even if they were not fully embodying the prescribed behaviours and sentiments. The strong energies of religious sites and spaces is something widely observed in India (Bellamy 2011) whilst, as will become clear in the following chapter, spaces within this village itself are regarded themselves as harbouring particular potency.

Others such as Nura seemed genuinely committed to the meeting and interested and reflective upon the reformist principles. She serenely told me that she attended every Sunday with Radhia, it being a highlight of her week. Yet a few Sundays later I arrived in the village for the meeting, parking the scooter outside of her house, only to find her dozing on an outside cot with her small, open-mouthed daughter curled neatly beside her. As will become clear in the chapter that follows, Nura’s inconsistencies when it comes to embodying the tenets of Tablighi have, according to some, led to her being caught by a *jinn*.

In Tarakhali, there appears to be an escalating sense of unease regarding women’s own actions, with a divergence between a novel, more prescriptive Islamic rhetoric and the learned and familiar ways of rural, Muslim but in essence, Bengali, female life. The weekly women’s *madrasa* meeting is the nexus that draws these differing strands of practice and belief into conversation with one another, in which women spend an hour and a half listening as the path their lives should take is outlined, before leaving and behaving entirely, for the most part, as before.

Clothing represents a primary target of female focused Islamic reform in South Asia (Robinson 2008; Tarlo 1996) and a noted example more widely of female cultural norms being teased apart from religious prescriptions (Liberatore 2013). All of my female interlocutors would forthrightly tell me that it is improper for Muslim women to wear a sari: they have been told this in the Sunday *madrasa*

meeting. For some, the male members of their family or even their children might have also said that the garment is too revealing, with the small blouse and open sides showing off a large expanse of midriff deemed improper and distinctly un-Islamic.

However, during the 16 months I spent in Tarakhali, not a single one of them altered their dress style. This was not due to the constraints of poverty, as new clothing was purchased, as is customary across the Islamic world, by almost everyone on both of the Eid holidays that I was present for. Not one of my interlocutors ever received a *salwar kameez*, or in fact any of the other more austere Islamic garments worn by some for the Jama'at meeting. Sara smiled coyly when I asked her why she had requested a new sari for Eid, in spite of telling me explicitly that it was not appropriate attire for a 'good' Muslim; "bhalo lagey", [It's what we like]. It is important to note that I was in Tarakhali not at the moment of encounter, but at a point by which these items of clothing had become "part of the everyday, without the potent meanings of self-transformation associated at an earlier moment" (Haniffa 2008: 357). Most women agreed that these sorts of coverings had been present for at least ten years, around the time the women's *madrassa* meetings first began to take place.

I was similarly told that all good Muslims will perform the *namaz* five times every day. In practice, even my most devout collaborators failed to come close to this obligation, due to varying combinations of other household pressures, absences from home and a reluctance to pray in public spaces, laziness, boredom, distraction, indifference and a whole host of other reasons and occurrences. When the *azaan* would sound, and most women I knew would tug the end of their sari over their head, they'd then tell me that it was time for prayers, before we would continue our conversation uninterrupted.

Women also maintained a controversial commitment to practices and festivals that represent exactly the kinds of "customary" (Jasani 2008: 433; Metcalf 1998) behaviours heavily critiqued by Islamic reform groups of all varieties elsewhere in South Asia. Though they did not sing the kinds of bawdy songs that have drawn such attention (Jeffery & Jeffery 1998), they nonetheless practised funeral lamentations, as will be specifically discussed in Chapter 7. The majority also marked Durga Pujo, when many would visit in groups the numerous *pandals*<sup>18</sup> erected in the surrounding countryside, as well as enjoying visiting the annual Christmas Fair held each December in [REDACTED]. These surprising inconsistencies are indicative of an underlying pattern of significant tension between idealised behaviour and actuality, that would leave discussions amongst adherents to reformist Islam around hypocrisy (Huq 2008) having little salience here.

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<sup>18</sup> Durga Pujo is the main Hindu festival celebrated in West Bengal in passionate and extravagant fashion. Pandals are the temporary temples that are erected to the goddess Durga that dot cities and rural localities.

Those who ostensibly embody the tenets of Tablighi within this village themselves perform an ambiguous and not unrelated role, not least by failing to overtly challenge such behaviors. Though these kinds of practices were never explicitly discussed within women's *madrassa* sermons, they were nonetheless implicitly condemned through the emphasis on leading an exclusively 'Islamic' lifestyle and setting aside *desher jinnish*. Both *imams* and the *maulanas* I spoke to refused to be drawn on whether such practices were in categorical defiance of Tablighi teachings, though they confirmed that they themselves would never participate and would similarly discourage the women of their households from doing so. Further complicating matters, the *imams* and *maulanas* themselves often performed *gunnin kaj*, or the popular kind of Islamic medicinal folk healing mentioned earlier, exactly the sorts of practices that reformist Islamic groups are widely understood to be seeking to eradicate.

In spite of these behavioural disparities, there nonetheless remains here a striking preoccupation with these reformist ideas, and an accompanying production of unease within these new Islamic discourses that are gaining increasing sway within the village. Whenever I was warned off of speaking to someone, as happened quite a few times during the course of fieldwork, it was because they were not 'good' Muslims, and consequently would be of no help to me. When I would explain that I was not interested in seeking out examples of moral piety, rather gaining a general picture of life in the village, there was a definite sense of confusion as to why the lives of these people who were having extra-marital affairs, stealing money through coercion or working as prostitutes, to take three of the most significant allegations made by people about their neighbours, could possibly be of interest to someone professedly interested in Islam and Muslim lives.

What was notable in these critiques was that the behaviours noted were in no way the primary targets of the Tablighi Jama'at discourses delivered in the women's *madrassa* meetings, nor ostensibly overtly Islamic in any particular way. These more generalised moral appraisals were complemented by a similar absence amongst the women of criticism for those who failed to fulfil the Islamic ideals of appropriate dress, *namaz* performance and *madrassa* meeting attendance. Women criticised each other for being *kharap* (bad), *olosh* (lazy), *hingsha* (jealous), for causing or creating *tenshun* and in the most extreme cases, for being bad wives and mothers, though never for failing to embody the praxis orientated teachings of the Tablighi Jama'at.

This was in spite of everything they were being told, which pointed to women being inherently Islamically more corrupted than their male counterparts. Though the explicitly non-hierarchical nature of the Tablighi Jama'at movement has been identified in certain cases as promoting a similarly egalitarian shift within the realm of gender politics, this was not the case here. Whereas Metcalf notes the potential for "less distinction" (Metcalf 1998: 115) between the male and female roles in Tablighi

adherents, in Tarakhali women were repeatedly and explicitly warned within the *madrassa* sermons that they were infinitely more likely to commit sin than men, and had a much greater chance of going *jahannam*. Further, the presence of the Jama'at had brought about no flattening effects, with explicitly male and female existences within the village as sharply divided as ever.

These present moral sentiments seem also entwined with past understandings. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, there existed a palpable longing amongst many of my collaborators for the past, when they forcefully acknowledge that though Islamic practices may have lacked the finesse of the current day, people were nonetheless somehow 'better' Muslims. They may not have had time to pray five times a day, or the requisite trappings of the Islamic faith such as prayer mats and headscarves, yet they embodied the tenets of Islam more fully. Teenagers would precociously tell me how much better they were as Muslims whilst living under the Raj, despite India having been independent for almost 55 years before they were born. I was told confidently on a couple of occasions a hopeful rumour regarding the likelihood of a British return to India in order to "sort things out".

If the past is confusingly admonished and admired, there is a similar female preoccupation with the future, specifically the afterlife, and what will happen to them after death when final judgment will be delivered. As will be explained in Chapter 7, the obsession with the hereafter, in spite of being the subject of intense discussion and speculation amongst all my collaborators, is something everyone nonetheless feels powerless to themselves pass judgment upon, firmly emphasising that only Allah knows who will be damned and who will be saved. The lists of sinful forms of praxis would be delivered sombrely, along with an enigmatic description of a sin free life as analogous to treading a narrow, dangerous and fraught path, before women would continue embodying all of these aforementioned things: wearing saris, forgetting to pray, speaking ill of others, bribing, stealing, neglecting their children's education and leaving the village without the appropriate coverings of modesty.

As will become clear in Chapter 6, almost every woman I knew in the village is involved in a wider game of political corruption, bureaucratic manipulation and electoral tactics. The deeply corrupt nature of local politics in this part of India forces those living in Tarakhali to strategize astutely in order to gain access to meagre state-granted benefits and much needed political protection. From bribing the gate keepers of government officers, hiding television sets from census-taking officials and "capturing" votes from other members of the community over whom they hold some form of social pressure, women have become the community's bureaucratic gatekeepers, forced to engage in such dubious moral practices in order to survive.



The uncomfortable sense of a confused present materialises in a striking form with those who want to leave the village. On several occasions by diverse women including Sara, Nura, Tabina and Farhaza, I was told in hushed confidences of deeply buried desires to leave Tarakhali and move somewhere towards the town of [REDACTED]. What was most interesting about these covertly delivered wishes was that they explicitly revealed the longing to leave this almost entirely Muslim village and live amongst Hindus and Christians, in what would be considered more ‘sinful’ places.

One day Nura, probably my most devoutly religious collaborator, seemed deeply out of sorts. After an hour of stilted conversation whilst she prepared lunch, as she squatted low over the cooking fire, wiping sweat from her forehead with the end of her sari, she began saying quietly that she wanted to leave the village. ‘bhalo lage na...Muslim elaka, bhalo lage na’ - [I don’t like it, Muslim places are not good]. She told me that she wanted to move to another village where they were more ‘friendly’, and that although she did not know anyone she was sure that she would be able to make friends quickly and have a better life there. To paraphrase a long, confusing and largely reticent conversation, she kept reiterating that Muslims were *nungra*, dirty and bad people, this was a bad place, and those around her were not good.

In other situations of ethnic conflict in South Asia, in which Muslims represent a religious minority, there has been a concerted attempt at “recasting Muslimness in a manner exclusive of ethnic others” (Haniffa 2008: 348). A similar process, though with deeper historical roots (Chatterji 1995; 2007) has in the recent political climate begun to gather momentum across India, with Nura’s sentiments expressed above the kind now widely shared in the public sphere every day. What is startling here is her internalisation of these discourses and deployment of them in relation to a quotidian and seemingly inappropriate scenario of intra-family conflict. When this is conjoined with her apparent embrace of and aspiration towards embodying Tablighi articulated principles, yet her absence of modification in everyday praxis, it is clear there exists here a deep confusion and uncertainty for women such as herself.

The women of Tarakhali are being delivered a vision of their lives by the Tablighi Jama’at. The image of a path is both familiar and benign in this rural village landscape whilst simultaneously becoming deeply restrictive and coercive. Not only are women being told that they are morally, ethically and consequently, religiously, inferior and more flawed than their male counterparts, they are experiencing an inevitable sense of dislocation and uncertainty as familiar and enjoyed practices are being labelled inappropriate and ‘un-Muslim’.

All of the women here want to be good Muslims. However, how can this be accomplished when the claims being made on their bodies and their habits do not match up with their own understandings?

Although perhaps intellectually and in the extraordinary temporal moments such as the women's *madrassa* meetings they appear willing to understand, accept and even embody this new ideology, at the same time they appear steadfast in their refusal to allow it to gain too much tenure in their everyday lives.

The incrementally increasing presence here of the Tablighi Jama'at over recent decades may have bought with it an onus on an abstracted Muslim connectivity, particularly to a wider Indian and global Islamic community. Yet this is undercut by the daily experiences of intense family and extra-family feuds over land and space within the village, which have themselves become characterised as in Nura's case above and in other instances in terms of religion. The precarious state of Muslims more widely in India undoubtedly feeds into what becomes an embodied critique of oneself and ones' neighbours. With the formerly clear divides between inside and outside being challenged and renegotiated under the auspices of this new revisionist ideology, formerly more straightforward ties and associations are becoming increasingly complex.

For those such as Khozana, who's aural histories of the settlement of Tarakhali evoke the early struggles to create a home here and the strong connections people feel to the land and to one another, there exists deep uncertainty and ambivalence about the changes that are occurring. Though all would agree abstractedly that the relations with the Tablighi Jama'at are a good thing, there is a palpable sense of nostalgia for the past conjoined with a resistance to re-orientate oneself to a different and unfamiliar sense of being and behaving like a good Muslim woman.

What is notably lacking in Tarakhali, is the space of female debate. Instead, in this village there exists what is said within the women's *madrassa* meetings and the behaviours of everyday life, with a seemingly yawning chasm in between. Though it appears that women here are like those elsewhere rejecting "being either automatically deferential to or simply resistant" (Marsden 2008: 411) to reformist Islamic teachings, they lack the ability to intellectually engage with, articulate and critique their differing perspectives and understandings. Discussions around these issues do not pepper family lives or schooling (Huq 2008), nor occur in any kind of public sphere (Marsden 2008).

This may in part be the result of the particular nature of this encounter as opposed to one with another reformist Islamic organisation. Those who have studied the Tablighi Jama'at have noted the resistance within the movement to the kinds of intense discussions that occur amongst women in other ethnographic contexts (Haniffa 2008; Huq 2008), instead the focus being "to emphasize faith and example, not disputation, debate or elaborate argument" (Metcalf 1998: 113). Yet the consequence of this absence appears to be confusion, uncertainty and anxiety over what it is to be a good Muslim woman.

There exists within this landscape another element entwined with the Muslim faith that is increasingly causing anxiety and wreaking havoc with the lives of those living in Tarakhali. The jungles, mosques and open fields of the village are thought by all who live here to be home to *jinn* – flickering and supernatural presences whose existence is rooted in Islam and whose relationships with humans have characterised folklore, myths and experiences of those across the Islamic world.

A formerly positive presence in this landscape, *jinn* are now blighting the lives of those who live here with illness, theft, abductions and possession. During my fieldwork, two of my collaborators would become caught. In the chapter that follows I will elaborate on *jinn*, possession, patterns and inconsistencies in this phenomenon and the local explanations behind why this is happening. I will then entwine an analysis of these otherworldly occurrences with the influence of the Tablighi Jama'at, suggesting a complex relationship in which women are becoming entwined with the supernatural, and in so doing are embodying counter-narratives that legitimately deviate from the path.



Figure 10: A man performing *namaz* in the *boro masjid*

#### Chapter 4 - Being Caught: Gender, Temperament and *Jinn*

The Djinn Falls in Love - Hermes (Translated by Robin Moger – Murad & Shurin: 2017)

A djinn I am.  
My fetters may be broke but  
Still they wrap around wrist and ankle:  
Every djinn's possessed.

The comet they speak of and know not where it falls,  
The love that glows like a lantern down a road which  
Means nothing to the fearful:  
Those passing see it as a mount, which keeps you clear of sword and spike  
But holds you up to arrows;  
I pass, my shade lashed to my foot, love eating my soul like an  
Acid;  
The dunes change places in the night without my leave;  
The walls around me and their guards in watches  
Cannot fault the full moon's coming to my heart  
Before it's even risen and I've seen it and  
Its silver floods my soul.  
Here it is with a mattock, shattering everything inside me.

-

“Have you ever walked down a path in the village alone? Maybe it is evening, the night time is coming, the light going. You are walking, but you start to think there is someone else there, walking down the path behind you. You stop, you stand still, you look.....but there is no-one there”.

Nura is a teller of stories. Like the most accomplished of narrators, she is naturally skilled in the art of metaphor and allegory, neatly shading the lines between the world around her and her listeners' imagination. Her narratives are also delivered with a dexterity of suspense, never offered up too quickly or too readily, instead occurring after long hours of stilted conversation whilst watching her cook, clean or sit in the earthen door way chatting to a neighbour or a passer-by of greater interest.

Over the months of fieldwork our initial pleasantries evolved into vivid discussions which were sometimes hours long. We would talk through lingering mornings as the unbearable heat rose, or at night during the inevitable power cuts, illuminated only by the flame of a gas lamp. When leaving her

company, in the quiet moments as the darkened land sped past and I made my way home exhausted, I would feel as though I were in a state between waking and dreaming, reality and fiction.

Nura is also a good mother and a devoted Muslim. Coming herself from a family of seven children in the next-door village, with its own share of rich and turbulent stories, she was married at just 13 years old. After a year living in Delhi with her husband, she returned to Tarakhali and is now the doting and bossy mother of three teenage sons and a small daughter, Radhia, who after three boys she coddles with fierce intensity. Committed to her faith, she regularly performs the *namaz* and speaks with pride of how she managed to keep her fast every single day of *ramzan* the years I was in the village. There is something else about Nura that I discovered over time: she is now one of those in this village caught by a *jinn*.

By exploring the story of Nura and many others in this village, and re-telling as best I can many of the stories that they told me, I will illustrate how people lead lives here that are vividly animated by the presence of *jinn*. The origin of physical ailments and possessions, figments of dreams and sources of uncanny or unnatural experiences, *jinn* and the stories told about them are an everyday feature of life and the landscape. Yet the quality of these relations with these otherworldly Islamic presences is becoming increasingly unpredictable and unnerving. Interactions formerly based around gift-giving, mischievous teasing and the sharing of food and celebrations particularly on days such as weddings, have become more sinister. Children are getting sick, teenagers are being abducted for days at a time and even those who attend to the new reformist Islamic directives of the Tablighi Jama'at are becoming violently possessed.

In what follows I will begin by describing *jinn*, taking particular care to situate them in the expansive Bengali mythology of the supernatural though crucially distinguishing them due to their rich Islamic history. I shall paint a picture of *jinn* as they exist for the inhabitants of this village, affirming the fundamental and constitutive role they play in praxis and belief. Drawing upon the existing corpus of literature on *jinn*, I will illustrate in contrast why the encounters in Tarakhali are more aligned with Favret-Saada's exploration of French witchcraft. Moving beyond her solely linguistic model, I will consider how objects, spaces and times are becoming imbued with occult potentiality. Then I will describe in detail the two possession cases that occurred whilst I was living in the village, that of Nura and of Kaki's new daughter-in-law Nusrat. With these cases in mind, I shall seek to conceptually, temporally and spatially map *jinn* interactions and possession cases, showing patterns but also attending to overriding irregularities and inconsistencies in these experiences.

Entwining the uncertainties outlined in the last chapter, I will suggest that the intensification of interactions with *jinn* here and their increasingly frequent and unpredictable occurrence could be

representative of the same deeply felt crisis. With internal religious shifts produced by the ambiguous presence of the Tablighi Jama'at and a landscape that has become increasingly depleted and contested, *jinn* and the timbre of interactions with them represent a way in which unease dominates the present. As explanations as to why people are being caught and who is responsible come under greater scrutiny, the confounding lack of answers produces here only a deeper anxiousness and uncertainty.

I will conclude by drawing gender into my analysis in an unexpected and illuminating way, foregrounding its role within a climate in which individuals struggle to make assessments of morality amidst intensifying doubt and suspicion. Through its invocation in explorations of the dual natures of *raas bhari*, heavy temperament, and *raas halka*, light temperament, I will highlight the women who diverge from the path outlined by the Tablighi Jama'at in their cultivation of masculine characteristics or 'heavy natures', and in doing so, remain unscathed.

### *The Bengali Supernatural*

I did not know if I would encounter *jinn* in West Bengal, though having conducted previous research in the *dargah* of Nizamuddin in Delhi, I was familiar with them. There I was told stories of uncanny experiences had by those visiting the shrine, of faceless voices, strange lights and objects that had been moved. I had watched as women writhed on the floor, screaming and tearing at their clothes and men threw themselves against the marble walls and slashed their arms with razor blades, possessed by evil *jinni* whose proximity to the powerful benevolence of the saint forced them to reveal themselves.

*Jinn* are figures that in many ways embody the sorts of Islamic ambiguity associated with the history of the region surrounding Tarakhali (Jalais 2010; 2013). They are described at several points in the *Quran*, in which an entire *sura* is dedicated to them. Furthermore, they populate the children's stories, folk tales, mythology and beliefs of diverse Islamic cultures all over the world. They are said to be created by Allah from a flameless fire, as *insan* (humans) are created from earth and angels from light. *Jinn* are thought to dwell in wild, eerie or uninhabited places, occupying liminal spaces as is common with supernatural presences across the world. However, in stark contrast they are also thought to regularly frequent buildings of Islamic religious significance such as *masjids* and *madrasas*, whereas religious buildings of other faiths are believed implicitly to repel supernatural figures. This significantly highlights that though they may be believed in and encountered by those of other faiths (Taneja 2017), *jinn* themselves are seen to be quintessentially Islamic.

There are some crucial things to note about *jinn*, the first of which is that they are categorically distinct from ghosts or spirits. *bhut* (ghosts) form a significant part of both traditional and contemporary Bengali culture. They feature prominently in classical folk tales and children's stories

(Day 1883; Mukhopadhyay 2008) inspired the most esteemed figures of Bengali literature and cinema (Ray 1969; Tagore 2011) and continue to feature in popular films and television shows today. The ramshackle, faded grandeur of the state capital Kolkata is steeped in stories of haunted, abandoned buildings and strange, ghostly presences whilst deep-rooted fascination and anxieties surrounding ghosts continue to accent the lives of many Bengalis on both sides of the border (Bear 2007a; 2007b; 2018; Gardner 1991).

*bhut* are thought to be the spirits of individuals who enjoyed an unsatisfactory, unnatural or accidental death. Within the coterie of ghostly figures there are numerous types of apparitions to be found, including the benevolent spirits of Brahmins and the tormented or unhappy ones of unmarried women. The link between beliefs in *bhut* and ancestors is highlighted in the Bengali festival of *Bhut Chaturdoshi*, celebrated the night before Kali Puja, in which it is thought that the spirits of the departed may return to the earth and each household will thus light 14 oil lamps to help guide them home. Thus, whilst *bhut* are the spirits of the deceased, *jinn* are viewed as a different category of being altogether.

Secondly, as a consequence of this and of similar importance, *jinn* are believed to have existences analogous to, and in parallel with, humankind. Like us they are born, they grow, they eat and drink, and they marry, procreate and eventually die, although their lives are far longer and far more extraordinary than ours. They are typically invisible to humans though able to observe our world clearly, and possess fantastical abilities including incredible speed, strength, and the capacity to shape-shift (Khan 2006; Lambek 1981; Taneja 2013). Further, as with humans, they are believed to be capable of both good and evil. Good *jinn*, those who have adopted the Islamic faith, will bring prosperity and benefit in their encounters with humans whilst mischievous or malevolent *jinn* who have rejected Islam are responsible for cases of strange accidents, physical ailments, natural disasters and human possession.

A third point that distinguishes *jinn* is that they are expressly understood as Islamic in origin. In particular, they are associated with older, more mystical interpretations of the faith, such as the Sufi strands of Islam hugely popular several centuries ago and credited in part with spreading the faith across India, as well as specifically the Bengal delta (Eaton 1996). Such is the strength of this connection, in certain cases *jinn* are even conflated with the figures of Sufi saints whose shrines they are known to dwell in (Taneja 2017). Consequently, possession by *jinn* is a common affliction of many of those who visit Sufi shrines or *dargah* sites across South Asia as has been widely explored elsewhere (Bellamy 2008; Bellamy 2011; Bigelow 2010; Taneja 2013; 2017).



Nonetheless the Islamic origin of these beings is increasingly becoming subject to dispute and though *jinn* have a place in the beliefs of a diversity of Muslims in Africa, the Middle East and Asia (Boddy 1989; 1994; Khan 2006, Rothenberg 1998), their existence is not without controversy. Many reformist Islamic groups have attempted to eradicate belief in *jinn* as an irrational and outdated element of the Islamic faith (Ahmad 2009). This view is aided by the certainly questionable attribution to *jinn* by some of responsibility for episodes of mass hysteria, severe undiagnosed mental health difficulties and, in some extreme cases, murder (Ong 1988; Nelson 2016, Nye 2012).

Their close association with Sufism means that *jinn* are also often associated with the ambiguous spaces of *dargahs* and are thought much like the deceased *pirs* to be capable of acting as intermediaries for, and able to intercede on behalf of, humans with God (Heitmeyer 2011; Taneja 2013; 2017). For these reasons in South Asia, as well as elsewhere, Sufism has thus “long been a target of Muslim reformers” (Bruinessen & Day Howell 2009; Metcalf 1989; Robinson 2008) as well as Muslim champions of a Western modernity who view the two perspectives as inherently incompatible. Recently, violent attacks by Sunni Muslims on Sufi places of worship, including last year the bombing of an Egyptian mosque in which more than 300 people were killed, and attacks on Sufi shrines in Pakistan that combined claimed over 100 lives, are indicative of the pervasiveness of the view that this heterodox element of the religion needs to be expunged.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the arrival in Tarakhali of the Tablighi Jama’at around twenty years ago began a gradual process of shifting the religious prescriptions in the village, with the pervasive belief in *jinn* one of many things to have come into question. As in other contexts in the Islamic world, there has been a concerted effort here to recast a belief in *jinn* as a locally rooted, folklore belief as opposed to in any way an Islamic, religious one. Within the women’s *madrassa* meetings, in contrast to wearing the sari for example, *jinn* were not explicitly identified and condemned as being un-Islamic. However, they were more subtly marginalised and critiqued, as with the other kind of ‘folk’ practices such as celebrating Hindu festivals and performing funeral lamentations. These *deshi jinnish* (country / folk things) were identified as exactly the kinds of obstacles that one may encounter in the “struggle in the path of Allah” (Huq 2008: 467), that could cause one to deviate from the true path and commit sin.

Though they are inherently complicit in the treatment of attacks by *jinn* through the administration of *gunnin kaj*, the village *imams* are reluctant to state whether they truly believe in their existence, saying only that they know others here believe. What was apparent however, as will become clear in the case of Nura, is that they were willing to identify being caught by *jinn* as stemming from lapses in Islamic piety. They also confirmed that should someone present themselves as afflicted, if they can see it to be something serious they will instead encourage people to visit the local hospital instead.

The conjunction of this burgeoning Islamic scrutiny over belief in *jinn*, coupled with speculations that *jinn* afflictions are often the result of black magic or curses placed upon people by someone known to them, mean they are therefore something often haltingly or secretly discussed. As with other ethnographers, when I learnt of the *jinn* in Tarakhali I was left with the tangible sense that they had been ‘hiding in plain sight’ (Khan 2006: 237); that everyone else was aware of them apart from me. This is perhaps indicative of the continuous, disturbing possibility of their presence, something so much part of the way of being in the world as to not even be remarked upon.

They received their first mention at Nura’s house one morning, when as we spoke she prepared her daughter Radhia for school. Having doused the whimpering four-year-old in cold water from the pond, she took a small bottle from the folds of her sari and began to vigorously rub oil from it over the little brown body, pot-bellied in a scruffy pair of white shorts. Catching the familiar scent, I asked if it was mustard oil, ubiquitous in any Bengali kitchen. She told me that it was, though it was special, it had been blessed by a *gunnin* for protection against attacks by *jinn*.

As Nura rubbed in the oil with firm, brisk strokes, she explained that Radhia had been having stomach problems and inexplicable pains that were caused by a *jinn*. A notoriously fussy eater, refusing even to eat rice (typically comprising at least two of the three daily meals in the village), and instead only consuming the highly desired and expensive treats of fish or meat, sweets and biscuits and Mazda orange drink purchased from the dusty shop by the road, I asked if this could be down to her poor diet. I was brusquely dismissed with a stern gaze from Nura. The *gunnin* had identified a curse, likely placed by a jealous neighbour, and instructed the powerful oil be applied daily to prevent against any further attacks.

After leaving Nura to continue with her busy morning’s work and walking down the path further into the village, I had the strange experience of conversations and events from the preceding nine months seeming to shift, reorder themselves and slot into place. As I would soon learn over the coming weeks, everyone had stories of *jinn*, be it whispered rumours, amusing stories, personal encounters or tales of sickness and possession.

### *Protection, Catching and Disappearing*

Kaki always wears a *tabiz* amulet around her neck which she got from a powerful *gunnin* near Budge-Budge, a town to the south west of Kolkata where her eldest daughter now lives with her husband and children. She tugged the black string from the front of her stained blue sari blouse to show me the

small silver bullet shape stuffed with a neatly rolled scroll of paper on which Arabic verses have been written. The *gunnin* had told her that, as she has a good heart, any contact with the *jinn* will be good also, due to the understood equanimity of human benevolence and positive *jinn* characteristics.

These *tabiz* protection amulets are so widespread amongst inhabitants here as to be an almost essential part of their daily attire. Hanging low and hidden beneath sari blouses or sun-bleached shirts, wrapped tightly around the fleshy upper arms of women, and knotted seriously around the necks of children, I had seen and asked about them many, many times over the first nine months of fieldwork. Always my questions had been skilfully deflected, dismissed with a smattering of words *roksha jono* [for protection], or *hingsha* [jealousy], or *kharap manoush* [bad people]. There was no mention of the *jinn* that I would discover to be so significant. Nor did people willingly speak of *kharap drishti* or the evil eye. Yet over time I would learn that guarding vigilantly against the unseen forces of those out to injure or attack was an important concern of all in the village.

As a result of my closeness with her family and her long history in the village, Kaki became a rich source of some of my first conversations around *jinn*. She explained how they move on the wind, possess incredible strength and how they dwell during the day in the fields, jungles and graveyards surrounding the village though visit the *madrasa* and *masjid* at night. How they appear in and animate dreams, though that the sound of the first *azaan* before the dawn dispels them. That they can observe us though we are unable to see them. How when a household has a new baby they stay nearby, watching - “manoush-er pichone thake” [they stay behind people].

She has encountered *jinn* here many times before. One of her elderly ancestors, *nani-sasuri* (father-in-law’s grandmother), had been particularly close with *jinn* when she was alive. She used to leave food out for them when celebrations were taking place in the house, which come the morning would always have been eaten. Sometimes she would find small offerings of food placed outside her own homestead, believing them to be highly potent *jinner khabar* or *jinn* food, that had been shared as part of their own celebrations. Around this time, she was given a block of gold by a *jinn* in a demonstration of the closeness of their friendship. I ask if these are stories that she has heard only to be met with a resounding “amra dekechi!” [we have seen!].

*nani-sasuri*’s friendship with *jinn* had however attracted jealousy from others. One day when preparing a meal in the compound outside their home, she had noticed in the dirt a piece of shiny black stone, which when unearthed she discovered to be a black cooking stone. Removing it from the ground she had carefully cleaned it and decided to put it to use. However, when it was placed in the fire she had collapsed, foaming at the mouth and begun to suffer convulsions as her son playing

nearby had also dropped to the floor, losing the power in his arms and his legs. A Hindu Brahmin<sup>19</sup> priest from a neighbouring village had been called and identified the stone as a product of black magic which had cursed the family with evil *jinn* possession. The land was now said to have become cursed and rotten, *noshto chilo*, and consequently no longer fit for dwelling. It had had to be sold.

During a conversation with Kaki's eldest daughter Salma who had returned to Tarakhali for Mubarak's wedding, she revealed that she too had a relationship with a *jinn*. When she was first married almost sixteen years ago, she had been unable to feel love for her husband. Struggling to understand why this could be, she gradually became aware of a *jinn* presence in her life that was preventing her from being able to manifest feelings of affection and tenderness as a wife should. "Ki bhoy legeche...Ekta khub boro kalo jinnish chilo" [What fear...It was a giant, black thing]. Standing up she places her right arm over her left shoulder with a spread palm, indicating the malevolent presence hovering behind her, just out of sight. I asked her when the *jinn* had disappeared, "kokhon jinn chole geyechilo?" "Oh it hasn't gone" Salma said, "kintu ekhon okhane thaakey, onek dur amake theke" [but now it is staying over there, much much further away from me]. She pointed behind her, gesturing past the edge of the homestead into the jungle beyond. Was she now able to love her husband? (in front of whom this entire story has been calmly, detachedly related). She looked at me with a small smile and said nothing.

Though the two cases I encountered whilst I was conducting fieldwork were both women, *jinn* attacks are not limited or constrained by gender. In the sprawling Loskor family, two male members had been caught by *jinn*, Aksha's brother and little Aryan, her grandson. Aksha's brother had sought out the help of a *gunnin* after becoming possessed and mentally deteriorating to the extent he was unable to work any longer, *pagol chilen* (he was crazy). It was determined that someone had given him some cursed food, a small red flower was thought to be the likely cause, which had allowed a *jinn* to enter his body. Tabina was reprimanded with a "chup! bole na!" [SHH! Shut up!] by Aksha when she smirkingly suggested that his wife was likely to be responsible for the black magic.

Little Aryan had been caught by a *jinn* when just a few months old. For seven days and nights he had been unable to eat anything at all, and all he would do was cry and cry. The doctors in the nearby hospital had been unable to find anything wrong with him, so the family had sought out a *gunnin* assuming there to be some form of darker underlying cause of the problem. The requisite amulets, *jol* and *tel* were provided, and although progress was slow after three days he began to eat again and recover. The *gunnin* had been very specific about how this *jinn* had caught him. The wife of Tabina's

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<sup>19</sup> Many of my older collaborators noted that Hindu priests used to be often consulted in the same way that *gunnins* are now for traditional medical cures, although this is something that would not happen today.

middle son had herself been possessed by a *jinn*. She had followed the requisite instructions for cure from the *gunnin* she had consulted, one of which was to place some water in the pond in order to transfer the *jinn* from her body back to the water. Aryan's mother had not been aware of this and had then washed vegetables in the water and served them to the family, which Aryan as the smallest and most vulnerable member had succumbed to. He still wore the protection charms around his neck and though recovered was nonetheless a sickly, clingy and fractious child.

In almost all of the experiences and stories of *jinn* I was told, there existed a prominent link with the landscape. *Jinn* were strongly associated with certain spaces: jungles, fields and graveyards, all wild, ambiguous and uncultivated. They were also understood as being present in religious spaces, the *masjids* and the *madrasa*, which they were thought to inhabit during the night time hours whilst humans were sleeping. They were believed to offer *namaz* as humans do, as one of my eldest collaborators told me lispingly, the few teeth in his mouth tripping up the consonants as they tried to escape. “jokhon *namaz* diche, *masjide*, *maje maje manoush dekthe parbe* - *hotyo. oi somoy, jinn namaz pore!*”, [When people perform *namaz* in the *masjid*, sometimes people might be able to see *jinn* - maybe...at that time, the *jinn* are also praying!].

Soon after her initial revelations about the *jinn* she believed to have been targeting her daughter Radhia, Nura told me that her husband had once seen a *jinn* at the mosque during prayers. It was on a cool Friday, in the middle of the short and coveted winter months, when something caught his attention from the corner of his eye, and he realised that it was in fact a *jinn* who was praying alongside him. After the *namaz* was completed, he whisperingly asked the *jinn* whether his wife had offered her own prayers that lunchtime, the *jinn* told him that she had not. When confronted on his return home Nura had been forced to ashamedly confess that, unusually for her, this was correct, as she'd been too busy preparing the fish for his lunch.

If certain spaces bear strong ties with the world of *jinn*, there are also times that are inextricably linked to their encounter. The night-time, dusk, and the earliest hours of the morning before the first *azaan* are the temporal points when the boundary between our world and theirs is thought to soften. Several times I was told stories amidst embarrassed giggles or glances of those without bathrooms attached to their homes, who had gone out to relieve themselves in the woods at night when they had been startled by loud noises or strange sights indicative of *jinn* being present. In some cases, these encounters would lead to the discovery of plots of black magic being directed against the homes of neighbours or others in the village. The stories were always recounted with an intriguing mix of amused and exaggerated performance, undercut by a deep seriousness and unease.

The prominence of *jinn* animating dreams is also significant. Many of the boys in the local *madrassa* have had experiences of *jinn* visiting them at night or waking to horrifying scenes of their dorm mates with fangs and distorted faces, only to wake up and be told when recounting their experiences that, in fact, they have been dreaming all along. *Jinn* are also said to reveal secrets or information when appearing in dreams, often about those responsible for sending them to curse and possess the afflicted, these revelations thus predictably remaining closely guarded secrets.

It was in the bedroom of the plump and perpetually cheerful Summaya whilst she was showing me a new sari, that I first noticed the small bottles tied to the windows. She told me that they contain *phuker jol*, or blessed or blown upon water obtained from a *gunnin*<sup>20</sup>, to ward off *jinn* who may try to enter at night. Given how much everyone else in the village mocks her behind her back, she had reason to be concerned. Where such precautions aren't taken, the consequences can be dire.

“I know they are present, because they took my daughter”. These were the words spoken by Lamiya as we sat on the floor of the mud veranda of their home, and she sieved through a bag of *chal*, discarding pieces of grit, straw and the small stones. Her teenage daughter was also with us, sat slightly to the side, quiet and engaged in her own task of peeling potatoes with a glimmering mollusc shell.

Slowly, Lamiya told me that around a year and a half ago, her daughter had disappeared one morning from their home. After calling out for her for several minutes and beginning to realise she had gone, she frantically searched the neighbouring houses of family and friends, running down the dusty paths of the village and scouring the edges of the fields and jungle. Slowly, it began to dawn on her that she had been taken by a *jinn*. Hurriedly, she sought out a *gunnin* who performed the requisite work and gave her items he told her would bring her back. The next day, some 36 hours later, her daughter returned.

This was not the only disappearance I had heard of. There were two others during my time in Tarakhali, both also teenagers living in other villages nearby. The most extreme of these was a boy who had disappeared for many weeks on end, assumed by his devastated family to have gotten lost or to have been killed. One day he returned, not only clean and in good health but with the renewed and fantastical ability to speak ten languages. “ingreji basa jane ekhon!” [He knows English now!] I was told excitedly, by those keen to share the extraordinary tale.

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<sup>20</sup> The practice of reciting incantations over water or oil and then blowing over them to impart potency is common amongst traditional Muslim healers across South Asia. See Das 2010; Flueckiger 2003.

Lamiya's daughter herself had no recollection about what had happened to her; "she could only tell me she had experienced something that left her without any position from which she could safely speak" (Favret-Saada 1981: 81). Keeping her eyes down, concentrating on scraping the rough brown skin from the potatoes to reveal the pearlescent flesh inside, she said that she had only come to on her return to the house, and before it had been as though she was sleeping. Where had she been, did they think? most likely in the fields or the forest somewhere said Lamiya, firmly taking the reins of our conversation once again. Why did she not call the police? No use! The delivery of the story and the tension that began to score the air did not permit further conversation, though left many questions unanswered.

### *Being Caught*

As my knowledge of *jinn* blossomed, so did my awareness that the experiences of those around me differed significantly from accounts of *jinn* possession I had encountered elsewhere. Where in other contexts the presence of, and interaction with *jinn*, was understood in broadly positive, subjective dimensions, as a "means of gaining voice" (Khan 2006), asserting resistance (Boddy 1989) or signifying generational continuity (Lambek 1988; Taneja 2013), in Tarakhali *jinn* were instead inflecting and influencing people's lives in an unpredictable, chaotic and predominantly destructive way.

In contrast to other ethnographic explorations, *jinn* here failed to substantively reinforce or strengthen bonds of kinship or ancestral connections (Lambek 1981; Khan 2006). Instead, they placed family relationships under intense scrutiny and strain, often causing rifts and distance amongst family members. Likewise, these encounters were not actively sought out or mediated by any other individuals (Boddy 1989; Lambek 1981; Taneja 2013; 2017). Their occurrence was random, and the experiences that were had seemed entirely spontaneous and disorganised in nature. Further, there was seemingly no correlation between gender, age, piety or general moral standing and the likelihood of being possessed or encountering *jinn* in Tarakhali. In many instances the pious, like Nura, were those affected, whilst the individuals in the village around whom rumours swirled of drunkenness, infidelity, or as in Aksha's extreme case, prostitution, remained gloriously unscathed. This haphazardness was underscored by the quotidian nature of the temporal junctures at which one could become caught: eating, washing, dreaming or sleeping.

In a recent exploration of the interactions and intimacies between humans and *jinn* at the site of Firoz Shah Kotla in Delhi, Taneja has illustrated the ways in which Hindus and Muslims cultivate relationships with *jinn*, whom they praise and petition in both vocal and written form (Taneja 2017).

The origins of these activities in the present day are traced back to the aftermath of the Emergency<sup>21</sup> in Delhi, in which individuals sought out spaces of “hope and healing” (Taneja 2017: 3) in the capital, in which to articulate alternative relationships to the state and explore ethical dimensions in contrast to the forms of piety focused, Islamic self-fashioning examined elsewhere (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005)

In the temporal and conceptual move from catastrophic violence to strength, support and hope, Taneja’s discussion neatly inverts what is being experienced by those in Tarakhali (Taneja 2017). Here, relationships with *jinn* have deteriorated over time to become emblematic not of healing, but of the destructive forces of uncertainty and affliction. Far from being sought-out presences that are revered and consulted, they are those that are feared and, wherever possible, actively avoided. Further, *jinn* have become emblematic not of the conduits through which a deep past can be cherished and maintained (Taneja 2017) but rather an element of the temporal state of perpetual crisis (Vigh 2008) being experienced by women in Tarakhali at this moment.

Reflecting on the language being used by my collaborators to describe encounters with *jinn*, I questioned whether I should even describe these cases as those of *jinn* possession. The words always used were in fact ‘*jinn* dhorche’ which mean “a *jinn* is catching / holding”. In her focus on the significance of the language of witchcraft and the occult, Favret-Saada has criticised other ethnographies in this area for the “disqualification of native speech and the promotion of that of the ethnographer” (Favret-Saada 2012: 439). Forcing myself to reframe these cases as those of ‘being caught’ enabled me to see further similarities between Favret-Saada’s work on French witchcraft and my own.

Her seminal account of witchcraft in the Bocage region of Western France is premised on several key elements of witchcraft encounters. There exists no certainty: of who believes; who is afflicted; who is responsible; and, who is capable of providing a cure. Nonetheless, there exists an intense focus on the identification of who, or what, is responsible for the affliction or misfortune, with this identity constantly shifting and never certain. Most disconcertingly, those responsible are almost certainly known to an individual, and are in fact “people who seem just like him” (Favret-Saada 2012: 51). People there are also “caught”.

“What makes an unwitcher is his Force” (Favret-Saada 1981: 19). The ability of an unwitcher to provide successful treatment for Favret-Saada’s collaborators is due to his Force in dispelling the

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<sup>21</sup> The 21 month period in India from 1975-1977 in which Indira Gandhi declared a nationwide state of emergency.



power of the words that have been uttered with the intent to harm or to kill. Similarly, this is why those who can perform *gunnin kaj* in Tarakhali are those with significant Islamic standing, and entailed potency. Those providing cures for the afflicted were also similarly graded and ranked on how much *shokti* or power or force they possessed: “kharap kaj mane onek shokti lagbe”, [bad work means a lot of Force is needed].

Whilst people in the village are focused on the cause or origin of the bad *jinn*, the *jinn* itself represents in the first instance the primary concern. In this way, they introduce a buffer into the relationship between the afflicted individual and the sender of the *kharap drishti*. Those caught by *jinn* may be cured without ever even knowing the origin of their affliction, in a more complicated paradigm than the one Favret-Saada works with:

Caught - Dewitcher - Witch  
Caught - *jinn* - *gunnin* - *kharap drishti* / *hingsha*

There are further elements that produce a deeper uncertainty in the cases of ‘being caught’ in Tarakhali. For those I worked with, whilst the *jinn* itself was the effect of *kharap drishti* or black magic, there is persistent contradiction and uncertainty over whether they are themselves the cause or the product of the misfortune. As a result, this removes some of the potency of the healing process, which for Favret-Saada is in its essence a reversal of Force back towards the witch from the person that they have afflicted. In contrast, though people in the village become healed of the symptoms they experienced having been caught by *jinn*, the origins of why they were caught in the first instance were unclear and those responsible remained both unknown to them, and unpunished.

A second feature is that in Tarakhali, catching and being caught is not constrained to the level of language. For Favret-Saada, witchcraft is explored primarily at the linguistic level. It is in the words spoken, imbued with potency that catch the unsuspecting victim, who struggles then to articulate him/herself what is happening. The de-witcher similarly uses words loaded with Force to break the bonds of catching and fling the Force back towards the direction of the witch. In this village, catching and being caught extends itself further into the realm of objects and materiality, both in terms of catching and of curing (Favret-Saada 1981: 8). There is the ability to become caught present in objects, in times and in certain spaces. Being caught may also be transferred through objects, washed from the hands of a second cousin-in-law into the murky pond water before being scooped up in a basket of vegetables and served to one’s innocent, baby son. As it is objects and not just words in this village that can be catching, there exists I will argue, an even more significant sense of unease.

When not the subject of *jinn* experiences, people were happy to speak for hours of stories they had heard, unusual occurrences that had been spoken of, or pieces of gossip or rumour that flowed through the village. Yet when they were themselves afflicted, individuals were much more reluctant to divulge their experiences, hesitatingly recounting things and becoming evasive to further questioning. This is analogous to the psychological and social disconnect observed by Favret-Saada amongst victims of witchcraft and their relations: “those who haven’t been caught have nothing to say...those who have been caught must not talk about it, to avoid getting caught again” (Favret-Saada 1981: 64). It was thus in some perverse way fortunate that two people I was particularly close with became possessed whilst I was in Tarakhali, allowing me an unexpected proximity to what happens when someone becomes caught.

It was not long after the wedding had taken place when Mubarak’s bride Nusrat became caught by a *jinn*. Returning to the village after a few days away, I was sitting outside the now abandoned club building where I had negotiated the use of a room to conduct some focus groups with women on the topic of the future. Nura wandered over from her homestead next door, and we chatted for a while before she asked if I had seen Khozana since I returned to the village. Moments later, I watched Kaki stride down the path towards us clearly agitated. “oh meye! somosha cholche ekhon, ami eka - ki korbo? ki oshubidha hobe! barite sob thik noy...*jinn* esheche e dorche!” [Oh daughter! Problems are happening now, I am alone - what will I do? What troubles will happen! At home all is not well...a *jinn* has come and is holding / catching].

Piecing together information from this rapidly delivered monologue and a conversation with Kaki’s other daughter-in-law Farhaza later on that day, I ascertained that a few days previously Mubarak’s new bride had become possessed by a *jinn*. She had begun to act strangely, before throwing herself on the floor and smashing her arms so hard it had caused her marital bangles to shatter. She had hammered her body against the ground, had hidden her face in her clothes, pulled her hair out and moaned and wailed. The *imam* of the *boro masjid* had been called to see her and he had instructed that a *tabiz* protection amulet was required. She had returned to see a *gunnin* in the village near her father’s home and was now staying there where her condition was said to be improving.

What was of concern was that it had emerged that Mubarak’s bride had suffered from these problems before. Nusrat had attended the junior school in Tarakhali known to be a spiritually contaminated and unsafe place. The space where it now stood had previously been *pukka jaygah*, a word normally used to refer to houses made from man-made materials and having alternative meanings of cooked, solid or substantial, in this case referring to an empty or open space in which *jinn* had lived. Now it had become *kharap jaygah* where these sorts of things were likely to happen. Three girls had in fact become possessed at the school at the same time as her, all of them being treated by the local *gunnin* with *phuker jol* and *tel*, and *tabiz* protection amulets.

Yet this history had not been disclosed to the groom's family prior to the wedding, an unwelcome deceit and cause for Kaki to be extremely concerned about the prospects of her new daughter-in-law. "cinta hochhe", [I'm worried] she muttered as she busied herself around the home, whilst her sister who had stayed on for a few weeks after the wedding tried to calm her by emphasising to me that at least they could be sure that the *jinn* was a good one. How did they know this? She explained to me that when it is a good *jinn*, the possessed will embody Islamic principles more strongly, in this case trying to pull the *chador* over her face and screaming verses from the *Quran*. When it is a bad *jinn*, people may tear their clothes off and curse violently.

There were many aspects of Nusrat's possession that were striking. The capacity of land to become *kharap* when the dwelling places of *jinn* were destroyed, the temporal vulnerability of women when entering a new household to be subject to these attacks and the reluctance to share the information prior to the marriage occurring, clearly indicative of the stigma and concerns it carries. Some months later, a second person I was close to became caught. Yet Nura's story was different in character, and due to my intimacy with her I was able to ask her exactly how it had happened.

It was the afternoon before Eid. The moon was due to be sighted that evening and the end of *ramzan mas* declared, though there were rumours floating around the village (which would turn out to be correct) that the celebrations might be delayed for a further day as the moon was unlikely to be seen. The atmosphere was one of exhaustion and frustration that after a long, hot and difficult month of fasting, the most coveted day of the year might still be one day further away.

At Nura's, Radhia had been allowed to begin the process of painting her hands in elaborate henna designs, a ritual usually saved for the evening before Eid although in the over excited four year-old's case, a welcome distraction during a long and sticky afternoon. Nura sat in the doorway, legs stretched out in front of her gently supervising Radhia's activity on the steps. She wore a green blouse and tattered yellow and red sari, the frayed end of which she toyed with whilst we spoke. In characteristic conversational style, we had talked about many other things before Nura looked at me and said quietly "*jinn* ekhono dhorche" [the *jinn* is still catching / holding].

It had begun at dusk. One evening a couple of months ago, she had left her house and walked to the large, shared pond lying to the back of it in order to bathe before offering the early evening *namaz*. Treading carefully down the muddy bank, she crouched down on the edge of the cool, brackish water and began to wash her arms and feet. She says that she felt a creeping unease, asking me whether I had ever experienced the sensation of someone walking behind me down a path in the village, only to discover that no-one was there.

When she returned home and began her prayers, Nura began to experience a feeling of something inside of her, moving around in her blood, constricting the space around her head. In the following days she was tormented by awful nightmares of giant serpents, unbroken fevers and a body wracked with pain, waking exhausted and deeply shaken. Pulling up the edge of her sari, she runs her finger along her arm as she explains that she also developed small welts or blisters on her skin in specific lines and shapes, indicative of something inside her. I could see on her forearm small raised lumps that may have been dismissible as the rashes common for those living in these conditions, though could also have been something far more sinister.

Alarmed, Nura travelled to see a *maulana* in the neighbouring village where she had grown up, due to her familiarity with him and his renowned status as a powerful *gunnin* in the area. He asked her to tell her story, to describe her symptoms, and to tell him if there had been anything different about her behaviour that day that might have led her to become vulnerable to a *jinn* attack. After a lengthy and fruitless discussion, she revealed that in the weeks before, she had purchased a scented hair oil from a woman travelling between the villages selling bangles, hair clips, lipsticks and other enticing feminine products. It was this scented oil and un-Islamic display of vanity that had attracted the *jinn*, the *maulana* concluded, and consequently was responsible for her condition.

Due to the severity of her symptoms, a particularly strong cure was prescribed. She was instructed to return with a chicken to sacrifice, blood from which was then used to write out the verses and numerical codes of the *tabiz* protection amulets to be placed at the four corners of her house. In addition, a further piece of paper was drawn up and placed above her door frame in an attempt to combat the terrible dreams that the *jinn* was causing her to suffer from.

In contrast to her emphatic belief in Radhia being victim of *kharap drishti*, Nura was ambivalent about whether or not the *maulana* had correctly identified the cause of her possession. When I asked if she believed that her lapse in Islamic piety could be responsible for what had happened, she simply said “jani na” (I don’t know). What did emerge was her concern that an earlier instance of being caught, when she had been living with her husband in Delhi when first married, had made her somehow vulnerable to such attacks. On this previous occasion, she had been moved outside whilst she was sleeping, awakening on the pavement outside the gate of their small home, with the door locked and no explanation for how she had got there.

[REDCATED]

Figure 11: Nura

### *Mapping Encounters and Misfortune*

The stories of Nura and Nusrat work in both similar and contrasting ways to underscore some of the key characteristics of *jinn* themselves, their interactions with humans, and how these encounters have begun to shift and change over time. They also suggest some critical discrepancies amongst these accounts, and hint at the stigma of “being caught” and the challenges felt by those in the villages of identifying the veracity of such experiences. If as with ideas of witchcraft in the Bocage, interactions with *jinn* in Tarakhali are viewed as addressing “in their own particular manner—the universal demands of life in society” (Favret-Saada 2012: 48), then one thing is strongly apparent: people’s lives here are becoming both increasingly fraught and significantly uncertain.

In the accounts of all in the village, there is a common theme which is the transformation over the past decades of what were positive and amicable, almost neighbourly, relationships with *jinn* into something that today is much more sinister and threatening. My elder collaborators in particular would all reference the sharing of food and celebrations with *jinn* in the past. Just as with Kaki’s *nani-sasuri*, they recall finding and enjoying offerings of the powerful *jinner khabar* on special occasions. In a handful of cases, people spoke of being able to establish friendships with *jinn*, communicating with them and being rewarded with fantastic gifts from their benevolent supernatural friends such as bags of rice and lentils, money or gold.

These kinds of relationships were no longer present when I was in Tarakhali. The contemporary experiences of, and stories about, *jinn*, are instead centred entirely around illnesses, possession and disappearances. Though it has always been possible for *jinn* to be manifestations of witchcraft or black magic, formerly it was both possible and more common to enjoy positive relationships with them. Today, this is no longer the case. Instead, there exists an escalation of unpleasant and threatening experiences, indicative of the rising malevolence in the intentions of those surrounding us to hurt, curse, or injure.

It is unclear what relationship this transformation of the nature of *jinn* and encounters with them in the village holds to the steadily increasing presence and power of the Tablighi Jama’at. Though reluctant to explicitly condemn a belief in *jinn*, the village *imam*’s, *maulanas* and most fervent adherents to the reformist ideology of the Tablighi Jama’at sought more subtly to marginalise and eliminate these beliefs through a dual process: firstly, by identifying a belief in *jinn* as a form of folk, non-Islamic belief; and secondly, identifying the rejection of such beliefs as necessary for the full embrace of Tablighi ideology.

Yet nonetheless, some of the most interested in these new teachings that I knew such as Nura were those that not only retained these questioned beliefs, but themselves became caught. Further, it was often the *imams* and *maulana*'s who in the first instance would be consulted when someone became caught, willing to prepare the *tabiz* amulets or undertake other kinds of *gunnin kaj* for a small fee.

Despite a near universal belief in the existence of *jinn* in Tarakhali, one of my interlocutors was unique in proclaiming her outright disbelief. Sara dismissed the existence of *jinn*, which as a Christian convert to the Islamic faith she identified as a specifically Muslim element of folklore and belief that she had not grown up with. Whilst neither of her children wore the *tabiz* protection amulets, her grandson Nihan however did in contrast have the black kohl mark drawn on in order to ward off *kharap drishti* that may be directed enviously by other humans. As a product of such an evil gaze was thought to be the capacity to send a *jinn* to cause affliction, it seemed as though like in the bocage where "no one...believes in spells with complete certainty" (Favret-Saada 2012: 47), no-one here is certain in their disbelief either.

Others believed in *jinn* but were sceptical about instances of their manifestation. Aliya, prompted by Nura's possession and the discussions that were churning around the family that lived next door to her, told us the story of her own daughter-in-law who had suddenly one day become caught by a *jinn*. Ever calm and pragmatic, Aliya had quickly summoned three local *maulanas* in the village in order to provide a diagnosis, whilst informing the girl's parents as she waited that should a *jinn* have caught her they would need to take her home to their own village, as she had no capacity to care for someone stricken in this way.

The *maulanas* arrived and having examined the girl told her there was a sure-fire way to check for *jinn*, but they would require a dark cloth, some pieces of *holud* or turmeric, and a jug of water. What they would do they explained, as the requisite items were being sought, was to shove the pieces of turmeric into the girl's nose, wrap the cloth around her head and then continually pour water over her whilst commanding the *jinn* to speak. At this point, if she were possessed by a *jinn* it would respond, and they could work out what to do next. Aliya wiped tears from her cheeks as she described how, having heard all of this, the girl jumped up from the bed upon which she had been reclining, crying out "sob thik! sob thik ache! lagbe na, lagbe na, ami ekhon bhalo bodh korchhi" [All ok! It's all ok! It's not needed, it's not needed...I'm now feeling a lot better] and that was how the matter was resolved.

As this anecdote illustrates, some people believe that others in Tarakhali are mistaken or pretending when they identify themselves to be caught by *jinn*. Aliya says some people use *jinn* as a means of absolving themselves from other forms of responsibility, be it domestic chores or the requisite contrition for bad behaviour. I remembered a conversation from a few weeks before when a woman

was describing to us the rage and fits that she suffers from as the result of *jinn*, and that Aliya had laughed. “Exactly!” she says, “She is just of a bad temperament” - “*jinn* dhorche na, *jinn* lagbe na” [*jinn* are not catching, *jinn* are not striking]. In spite of her scepticism around when people may claim to have been caught by *jinn*, it has not stopped Aliya believing in them.

If belief in *jinn* and who is caught are uncertain, this is at least in part due to the simultaneously shadowy yet deeply shocking qualities of the black magic used by those responsible. To be conscious of the prominence of beliefs in *kharap kaj* or black magic in the village, and the devastating effect it can have, one need only watch the gangs of children playing along the roadside or skittering excitably down the paths to school. Almost all under a certain age will have a large black mark on their forehead that has been scrawled on with kohl and is intended to guard them against *kharap drishti*, or the evil eye. Those dabbling in black magic are thought to use *gunnin kaj* to inflict curses or *jinn* possession on other members of the community, with those one is closest to typically falling under immediate suspicion. Family members, jealous neighbours, disgruntled employees, typically described as either *hingsha*, jealous, or simply *kharap*, bad. Whilst people and objects seem able to be exorcised of these malignant forces and presences, land in contrast seems able to be cursed in a way that is impossible to undo.

The spaces from which *jinn* are driven, either intentionally or by mistake, become corrupted and dangerous. The junior school in which Nusrat had become possessed was known to be one of these, as was the settlement on the other side of the main road that was now home to the extended Mollah family. Formerly there has been a fruit forest of mango and coconut trees here, in the middle of which was a strangely shaped tree where the *jinn* were thought to dwell. A previous family had purchased the land with the intention of building a house there, though their attempts to do so had been continually frustrated due to the presence of *jinn*. Unable to live there, they had eventually sold it cheaply to the Mollah family who currently resided on the land. I was told in hushed whispers that they had since suffered many problems, they became sick, embroiled in scandals and bad things happened to the family.

Trying to piece together stories and find areas of overlap, it seemed as though moments of all types of weakness (moral, physical, emotional) were points of vulnerability at which point *jinn* could catch them. When I suggested this to Kaki and Aliya one morning they responded “hai! hai! thik bolo!” [Yes! Yes! That’s right], indicating times such as sleeping, being outside at night, or entering the new and unfamiliar home of one’s in-laws all as temporal junctures at which individuals were exposed and at risk. The significance of time in these *jinn* encounters is further emphasised by the fact that teenagers are those starting to disappear. The night, dreaming states and the liminal points of the day



are also moments at which individuals may be particularly vulnerable. Along the boundaries and the edges, they are exposed.

In later reflections on her work, Favret-Saada offers a structuralist style schema on the axes of witched and witch, summarising their inherent qualities:

“Good, force (lower case), Limitedness, Visibility, Passivity = vulnerability, weakness, ruin, death. Evil, Force (upper case), Illimitableness, Invisibility, Activity = invulnerability, Force, monopoly, murder.” (2012: 50)

There are similar fragments here, words that are used, qualities that seem to be repeated again and again as aspects of *jinn*, of humans, of those who are caught and those who aren't.

### *People and jinn*

Earth / Clay	Wind / Air
Day	Night
Limited	Infinite
Unseeing	Seeing
Visible	Invisible

### *People who get caught and people who don't*

<i>bhari</i>	<i>halka</i>
Heavy	Light
Brave / courageous	Weak / vulnerable
Speech	Smell

### *Good*

### *Evil*

<i>pukka</i> (man-made, ripe)	<i>noshto</i> (rotten)
<i>samne</i> (in front of)	<i>pichone</i> (behind)
<i>songe-songe</i> (with)	<i>eka</i> (alone)
<i>sakti</i> (peace)	<i>shokti</i> (force)
<i>sohanobhooti</i> (compassion)	<i>hingsha</i> (jealousy)

From these scraps of stories, rumours and experiences that I have tried to weave together above, there lies a deep contradiction in accounts of *jinn* in Tarakhali. This is that they are characterised both as

seen and invisible presences. When asking anyone to explain to me as an unfamiliar outsider the characteristics of *jinn*, one of the first things people would tell me was that as humans we were unable to see them, though they are able to observe us. Yet on multiple occasions, from the large black presence over Salma's shoulder to the fellow worshipper in the cool winter lunchtime in the *masjid*, people would tell me stories in which they had in fact seen *jinn*. Further when pressed to explain this, there was little sense of there being any inherent contradiction.

Over time, I began to be aware of *jinn* occupying a particular spatial location in the landscape through which people moved in Tarakhali, which was *pichone*, behind. They walk behind you on the path, stand behind you when you're caught, wait behind you if you're celebrating the birth of a child, and dwell behind the village itself in the fields, jungles and graveyards. This sense of something being behind, just out of sight, was a thread that ran through many of the narratives and experiences of *jinn* had by people. Intriguingly, it tied in with one of their supposed physical characteristics and a way in which one could recognise if one was encountering a *jinn*, which is that of their feet pointing backwards.

Much like the comet in Hermes' poem, *jinn* are here a deeply uncertain presence. They are seen and unseen, known and unknowable. Amidst the deep, often contradictory ethnographic data drawn together above, there are two prominent features that can be seen to characterise experiences of those in the village with *jinn* in the present. There is an increase in the frequency of encountering evil *jinni*, resulting from black magic, and a worrying inability for the cures and remedies that have been used for decades to have the desired effect.

#### *raas bhari and raas halka*

The tangible shift in the role that *jinn* have begun to play in people's lives here could be understood as a materialised testament to increasing uncertainty surrounding religion, morality and security felt by those in Tarakhali. An increasing awareness of living in a non-Muslim land conjoined with understandings that their familiar cultural praxis contravenes an idealised Islamic identity, the landscape and the *jinn* who inhabit it "possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musings on who one might become" (Basso 1996: 107).

As with the ghostly figures she encountered in an Anglo-Indian railway colony, Bear notes that there exists "a particular characteristic of uncanny experiences, which is that they reify the forces of the past and space as external influences that act on people from the outside" (Bear 2007b: 37)(Bear 2018). For my collaborators *jinn* similarly heightened the strength of the external effects of landscape

and history, in a materially, environmentally rooted fashion distinct from the subjective focus of many accounts of possession (Boddy 1989). Yet whereas for Bear's Anglo Indians these uncanny experiences serve to bridge perceived divides in genealogies and strengthen understandings of the self, as stories associated with landscapes do elsewhere (Basso 1996), for Muslims in Tarakhali experiences of *jinn* seem to highlight such discontinuities and ruptures.

For Taneja, who's exploration is of the relationships people cultivate with *jinni* in the ruins of Firoz Shah Kotla in Old Delhi, interactions with *jinn* serve in the production of care, memory and justice in a brutal and unforgiving post-colonial urban landscape (Taneja 2013; 2017). Yet in contrast here, as opposed to giving voice to the "intricate webs of genealogy, memory, and belonging" (Taneja 2013: 142) that bind my collaborators to this place and to each other, *jinn* were not only afflicting and attacking them but erasing the bonds of trust and intimacy they had carefully cultivated with one another, through the intense production of unease and uncertainty.

As touched upon in the previous chapter, there exists an escalating concern that the village is morally in jeopardy. Although previously there was no brick-built mosque in the village, or the regular troop of Tablighis whose presence could, one might think, provide human embodiment of the village's ties with a wider, abstracted network of Muslims, questions about whether Tarakhali was more Islamic previously were almost always answered affirmatively. It seems that in spite of the former absence of such cosmopolitan trappings of Islam valued elsewhere, within the confines of the village there is a feeling that something in the spirit of being a good Muslim has been eroded over time. The prevalence of encounters with *jinn* now, themselves potentially the result of others wishing ill, may be the embodiment of moral degradation in an ethical landscape of uncertainty.

There is little one can do here to avoid being caught by *jinn*. Protective amulets worn at all times, wearing one's hair tied back, being careful around food particularly that consumed outside of the village and preserving the sanctity of one's home by fastening small bottles of *phuker jol* to the window frames in order to prevent *jinn* from entering were all practiced vigilantly. Avoiding dark or lonely places, particularly after dusk or when one was alone were other strategies. None of these things however, will be enough.

The women who did have intimate encounters with *jinn* but managed to avoid being caught were clear as to why that was the case; *raas bhari*, or literally translated, heavy temperament. This was a phrase that I first heard from my adopted aunt Khozana when she was laughingly explaining that though she had never been caught by *jinn* herself, she had encountered one. She had awoken in the middle of the night and stolen quietly out of the house in order to go to the bathroom in the jungle behind her compound. As she began to crouch down she was startled by a loud rustling in the leaves. Believing

there to be a *jinn* there where she was about to relieve herself, she had said aloud “Excuse me! I’m sorry I’ll go over here”.

A little while later as she was about to make her way back to her house, she had heard the giant crash of something falling from the sky. She had returned to the house hurriedly, glancing back over her shoulder as she moved through the undergrowth, and though afraid had calmed her nerves by lying with her watchful eyes open, reciting the names of some family members. ‘ami raas bhari!’ she had said, “alada manoush...*jinn* dhoreche. Raas halka” [Other people...*jinn* would have caught them. Weak temperament]

These characterisations of temperament began to crop up more frequently whenever I was talking about *jinn* with women here. Aliya used it when describing her own views towards *jinn* and that she didn’t have the character necessary to be caught. “raas bhari manousher jono hoy na!” [for heavy temperamental people it doesn’t happen!] she would say, putting down her sewing needle and looking up at me in mild frustration that I had yet again interrupted her work with talk of *jinn*. She was emphatic though that these differing temperaments were not aligned with moral evaluations such as good or bad, reminding me of how her own daughter-in-law, a quiet, shy and diligent woman, as with Kaki’s Nusrat, was someone who was *raas halka*.

Over time, the single pattern that emerged from the myriad of stories of *jinn* that I encountered was that those who were caught were widely perceived to be *raas halka* and those who weren’t were *raas bhari*. It was therefore not piety, age, gender, moral standing or a neglectful nature that women believed exposed you to an attack by *jinn* here, rather that some people were by their very temperaments equipped to deal with the negative forces that people may send in their directions, whilst others were vulnerable to being caught.

There are of course overlaps and intersections between other characteristics and such heavy or weak temperaments. Those occupying liminal spaces or moments such as teenagers, newly married women and the recently bereaved are more vulnerable to being caught, as perhaps inevitably are children. As women become older, many both physically but perhaps more crucially, temperamentally, “gain weight” and became *bhari*, making them somehow heavier physically as well as less likely to be caught.

Dwelling on the varied meanings of *bhari* (heavy, bulky, cumbersome, weighty, massive) and *halka* (light, mild, easy, portable, airy) it is hard not to be drawn to the material quality of each of these descriptors, but also to their gendered significance. The traits of someone who was *raas bhari* such as bravery, courage and strength, were far more typically associated here with masculine individuals and

temperaments than those of *halka*, lightness and weakness, which were far more applicable and characteristic of women. Perhaps, therefore, whilst gender itself was not the issue in terms of who was or was not becoming possessed, women with more masculine temperaments were, nonetheless, those who were avoiding being caught.

The insight provided by reframing gender in the analysis of this material to temperament as opposed to physical characteristics also prompted me to ask a further question - what gender were the *jinn* themselves? Though in their essence able to be of either gender and taking male or female forms in a variety of different contexts (Khan 2006) the *jinni* encountered by people in Tarakhali were entirely male. Reflecting on my notes I realised there was not a single instance in which a *jinn* had been identified as female.

What are we to make of the gendered nature of *jinn*s themselves in Tarakhali? Or the gendered characteristics of those who avoid being caught by them? Is this an exploration between masculine and feminine? Are *jinn* working as a challenge to other narratives in which women are increasingly encouraged to cultivate the characteristics more appropriate to women?

When I was last in Tarakhali, Nura was still caught by a *jinn*. The previous cures she had attempted had failed, only exacerbating her anxiety and uncertainty over why she had become caught. After Eid she was planning to visit the neighbouring *maulana* again in order to set in motion a new attempt to exorcise its presence. Nusrat had returned to the village from her father's home, although her relationship with Mubarak remained unsettled and unhappy, particularly as she had shown herself early on to be of such a vulnerable and weak temperament.

It may be appealing to draw a straightforward causal connection here between the intensifying presence of the Tablighi Jama'at and the escalation in malevolent attacks on humans by *jinn* in the village. I want to suggest an arguably less directly causal and arguably more subtle relationship, which is that 'being caught' by *jinn* may be a set of experiences that are allowing women, or perhaps the *jinn* themselves, to author counter narratives to the simplistic gendering of characters and temperaments in Tarakhali.

If temperament is the most significant factor in whether one is liable to be caught, then those being caught by *jinn* are perhaps the embodiment of the incompleteness of the path prescribed for women by the Tablighi Jama'at here. For those such as Nura, doubt persists. She remains unclear as to whether she has strayed, responding ambivalently to the claims of the *maulana* that a lapse in Islamic piety could be responsible for her becoming caught and continuing to question why else this may have happened, and what she could do to avoid it.

Perhaps the dually Islamic though frictional presences of the Tablighi Jama'at and *jinn* can be seen here as representing two different extreme narratives in the middle of which lie the women of this village. For Favret-Saada, witchcraft experiences “provoke a fundamental suspicion about the frailty of the social contract, and simultaneously...provide a means of consolidating this latter through a perpetual activity of group and self-reconstruction” (Favret-Saada 2012: 52). In Tarakhali the suspicion and unease remain unresolved through a subsequent process of strengthening and reconstruction, leaving both the social contract and the future uncertain.

[REDACTED]

Figure 12: Radhia letting her henna dry

### Part Three: The Spaces of Labour and Politics

#### Chapter Five – “We are poor people, what will we do?” Inside and Outside Labour

The *dadar* frame is long. Two sizeable, spherical bamboo poles of about two and a half metres in length, supported either by two smaller poles placed precariously on an earthen window sill or low-slung mud wall, or by balancing on top of two upturned oil drums or a flimsy makeshift frame fashioned specifically for this shouldering purpose. There are two smaller, rectangular wooden slats that slot horizontally into holes at the end of each pole in order to make a fixed oblong frame.

Along the inside-edge of each bamboo pole run holes spaced at around a thumb width apart. Through them will be strung a thick, white thread, piercing the cloth of the sari on its unfinished, un-patterned edges that will later be trimmed and discarded, binding it tautly to the frame like a well tied shoelace. These running stitches will at some point be unpicked, the 5 metre length of a sari requiring the fabric to be moved and repositioned in order to be decorated once more. On each end slat there are similar holes, though on these pieces they are clustered slightly closer together. The cloth is attached here with looser thread, before nails are driven into the frame to finally secure it, using the bases of rough palms or the cracked heels of feet.

The frames are typically made by a *raj-mistri*, the generalised term here for a builder or carpenter, with the materials and labour costing around a thousand rupees. This makes it very expensive in addition to being so large as to dominate the cool, shaded verandas of most houses. Aside from the frame, everything else is typically provided by the *ostaka*, the brokers, men who pootle down the dusty roads of the village interior on groaning, put-putting mopeds, overloaded with bundles of fabric, reams of thread and shimmering sachets of beads. In two exceptional cases, these brokers are women, who with quiet determination have moved away from the *dadar* frames into managing those who continue to sit close, hunched over, by their sides.

Onto the tightly drawn expanses of fabric, the patterns are carefully copied. Swirling botch teardrops or lustrous roses are sketched onto delicate fragments of tracing paper from instructions, images or imaginations. A pin is then taken, and tiny holes are punched along the pattern outlines. The paper is then laid gingerly onto the wincing fabric, and a white gritty paste of ground chalk mixed with kerosene is spread over it, using a scrap of a rag or pieces of newspaper. This leaves just a faint whisper of an imprint on the fabric, enough to follow but not so much as to permanently mark. This paper is then gingerly lifted before being placed again and again on the material until the border, or the pattern, is completed. Now, the work can begin.

The needles, strange objects despite the deceptive familiarity of their name, resemble small ice picks, hooks or surgical instruments, long points with spherical handles and curved, sharp ends. Cheap beads from tatty bags are scooped up on to the shafts in tiny, glimmering rows. The needle sits in the right hand, poised, ready. In the left-hand thread is wound in a loop and held under the fabric through which the sharp point of the hook is then forced. The hook catches the thread greedily and pulls it up through the fabric to make a loop, a bead is flicked down to the taut surface before the thread is pushed down again through the fabric and a new loop is made. Up down, up down, up down.

The time, remuneration and detail of each piece are neatly correlated. The more simplistic designs will require around a day's labour, and each will earn its producer no more than a hundred rupees. For the complicated and intricate pieces, up to two or three days of work will be needed, and the remuneration accordingly is higher at about two or three hundred rupees. Given the competing demands of other work, a household is unlikely to earn more than six hundred rupees in a week.

That it is a household that produces each piece may be slightly misleading. Whilst *dadar kaj* is undoubtedly a shared endeavour, it is one that in Tarakhali is only ever undertaken by women. Exhausted mothers, rickety grandmothers, reluctant young girls before or after school and meek newly married daughters-in-laws can all be found huddled alongside the bamboo frame. Many women are no longer able to do the work, after years of toiling at night by a small, flickering gas lamp their eyes are ruined beyond repair - *chokhey lagche*. When asking women why men do not do *dadar kaj* I'm met with snorts of derision. They say that they can't but they just do not want to, is the implication.

[REDACTED]

Figure 13: Aliya's daughter-in-law Muniya



Aliya has been doing *dadar kaj* for more than fifteen years. It has taken on greater significance as the time passes, as her husband's mental health has declined to the extent that he is now almost entirely incapacitated, spending most of the day asleep on the cot bed in the small, dark interior room. It is under her firm yet amused gaze that I learn how to shuffle the beads onto the needle, how to pull the thread through in a tiny loop and flick a bead on top of it before pushing it back through the fabric.

When I talk about the difficulty of the work, she chides me: “kothin nei! kintu khub kosto” [It is not difficult! but does cause discomfort], as I know from the strained eyes and cricked necks I've been asked to inspect and feel compelled to coo over. As the years pass, the remuneration is dwindling. With a sigh and a wince, Aliya raises her eyes and says “eki kaj, paisa kom” [the same work but the money is less].

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*kaj* - work. This is the single word or suffix used by most women when they would tell me what it is that they do all day, every day of their married lives. They fail to draw distinctions between varieties: sweeping, cleaning, fixing houses, tending vegetable gardens, working in the fields, bathing and dressing their children, minding someone else's, cooking, feeding, washing clothes, washing plates, negotiating bureaucracy, political canvassing, managing their families, cultivating useful relationships, overseeing homework, sewing blankets, casting spells and attending microfinance meetings. For most here, the days were consumed by three kinds: *ghorer-kaj* (housework), *rannar-kaj* (cooking) and the above, aforementioned, *dadar kaj*.

In this chapter I will explore the varieties of labour that women in Tarakhali undertake. I will suggest a more holistic description of labour is analytically useful here, in this largely informal labour market in which forms of unofficial or unwaged labour can nonetheless be economically or socially productive. Such an approach is not only reflective of my collaborators own categorization but will be further illuminated by their engagement with state bureaucracy and politics, as will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

I will consider how the role of *kaj* in women's lives here finds fit in relation to Islam. Through a focus specifically on the arrival of *dadar kaj* to Tarakhali, I will illustrate how the particular features of this form of labour have resulted in a snug, though abrasively close fit with women's domestic and religious livelihoods. In closely exploring this pervasive type of work, its underlying limitations in terms of longer term economic and social advancement will be highlighted and drawn upon in a critique of the dominant microfinance model as enacted in this village. Underlying these tensions, I will claim is a distinction between labour performed outside the home and the village, and the different forms of labour performed inside.

In conclusion I will explore the darker side of women's work here, when this binary appears contravened. I will illustrate how women's labour may run aground against dominant gender and religious restrictions, leading in the most extreme circumstances to violence and death. In conclusion I will draw together the continually challenging labour landscape faced by women here, highlighting possible alternatives and considering other ways and forms of empowerment that they might seek to both obtain and embody.

*"We are poor people, what will we do?"*

We are sat on the dusty floor of the village Club House building<sup>22</sup>, only minutes ago cleared of scraps of cobwebs and the desiccated corpses of spiders. This strange, incongruous space has been offered to us by the Club President, following the required period of obsequious listening to his personal and professional history, on the agreed basis that a small remuneration will be given to all of the female participants for their time attending the planned focus groups. On reflection, our gatherings will thus fall on the easier end of the spectrum of just the kind of informal, time consuming, and in the eyes of many, pointless, exercises that are often nonetheless of great financial significance for women here. Yamina, a stern but kind woman who has often welcomed me into her cramped home for long evenings of conversation with her and family, is forcefully stating the importance of work for women here: "kaj na korley, ki khabo?" [If I don't work, what will I eat?].

For those on the geographic and economic margins, work is inextricably bound up with survival, the most basic aspect of which is arguably eating. The consistently reiterated refrain from all those here "amra ghorib lok, ki korbo?" [We are poor people, what will we do?] was uttered as a statement of fact, as an explanation for the tireless way in which many women approach their work, and as a rallying cry of protest at the ceaseless struggle most contended with on a daily basis in order to scrape together the means to survive.

The labour landscape of Tarakhali finds its most significant stratification in gender. The forms of work undertaken by men are almost entirely distinct in terms of profession, status, location and remuneration from those of women. Broadly speaking there are three kinds of work that men do here. There are a small number involved in agricultural work, typically farming rice in the sprawling fields that encircle the village, roughly half of which will be kept, and the rest traded. They may also grow vegetables, and spices such as chillies which will be dried in the scorching sun alongside the scratchy

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<sup>22</sup> This building, adjacent to the Primary School and the main, tarmac road was a relic of when "Social Clubs" used to be run in these remote rural areas by charitable organisations.

leaves of palm trees, the latter used to make fire kindling and *jharu* or brooms from the spokes that dissect them. Those involved in this kind of labour were the poorest in the village, particularly after the destruction wrought by cyclone Aila in 2009 and the extensive flooding of my first steamy wet summer in which both crops and profits were obliterated.

A large swathe of those in the village living at a similar level of poverty were involved in what was loosely termed *raj-mistri kaj* or construction work. A term originally used to signify expertise and master craftsmanship originating in Mughal times, here it has now come to signify everything from building, stone-mason work, carpentry, plastering and painting. Many of those performing such labour would migrate temporarily to Delhi, Kerala or Mumbai, or would live in cramped, squalid quarters in Kolkata during the week, returning only on Sundays.

In an inversion of what Singh describes in Shahabad (2016), though of similar status economically to those involved in agricultural work, this kind of labour was nonetheless more highly valued socially. Perhaps it was the chance to leave Tarakhali which, as we will see, still holds significant social prestige, or perhaps as Farhaza's husband Shoor explained to me, it simply did not contain the significant risks such as flooding or a poor harvest that were faced regularly by the village's farmers.

Then there are the men who have their own *choto byabsha*, or small business. These range from owning small 'shops' or stalls that may sell tea, snacks and other provisions, perform cycle repairs, provide tailoring or alterations or in one case offer a 'chop shop' where in a strange colonial hangover, fried potato cutlets were sold to customers to enjoy whilst watching the Indian Premier League cricket games on a boxy 90s television. A few of these were in the village: two butcher carts; a barbers; two tailors; a handful of tea stalls; and, a cycle repair shop. Others were located at the roundabout where the road forked providing two ways into the Sundarbans, and a lucky few were in the relationally glamorous hub of [REDACTED] itself.

Crucially many of those with *choto byabshas* had been fortunate enough to travel outside of the local area, gaining the skills and perhaps more significantly, the social capital, to return and establish small businesses themselves. Nura and her husband had spent two years in Delhi, Summaya's husband had spent much longer, learning the *dadar kaj* work and becoming the first to bring it back to this village. In an interesting inversion of those who leave rural locales behind for urban centres permanently, these people would always return, drawn back by the powerful pull of the land, or their *jonmostan*.

Some involved in *choto byabsha* did not require a premise from which to conduct their operations, such as the thirty or so men who have become *ostaka* or brokers for the booming *dadar kaj* sewing industry in the village. Others included tutors, such as Yamina's husband Monrul and his brother, two

erudite and educated men who lived next door to one another and offered regular group and private tutoring sessions to paying children in order to supplement the feeble schooling on offer locally, a mandatory expense should one wish a child to succeed. Aksha and Tabina's husbands, another pair of brothers, had both been rickshaw drivers, sharing the vehicle and the shifts until Aksha's Ali-Hami began to suffer from an eye problem and could no longer drive. After some time, I learnt that this in fact meant he had been caught at the wheel whilst intoxicated and had been banned from driving.

There are just a privileged few here who have government jobs, a number that disturbingly neatly tallies with the number of *pukka* or brick-built houses in Tarakhali. There is Sara's husband, the tall and dashing police officer, the young son of Munira who holds a position in the local Block Development Office, and the Halder family (widely rumoured to be low-level gangsters) where in fact it is the matriarch who works in the Customs and Excise department in Bariupur, in an act of what we will see in the next chapter has become the deliberate foregrounding of female political figures here.

Finally, there are the handful whose work is bound up with their faith. The village *imams*, the *madrassa* teachers and even the elderly men whose small stipends for delivering the call to prayer are enough to eke out an existence in old age. Whilst this group remains impoverished, their proximity to their faith nonetheless provides significant social capital and esteem.

Excluding those with government jobs, there is a notable flexibility and fluidity to employment here, as is characteristic of developing economies and elsewhere in India. Shops may remain shuttered for holidays, weddings, weather or disinclination, labourers may decide to skip a season of work and *adda* is gleefully engaged in at any opportunity. Employment contracts and fixed rates of remuneration are incredibly rare, only found in the exceptional instances of official government jobs, and even there are often subject to variation or negotiation. Though terms may exist on paper, in practice a varied arsenal of bribery, corruption, embezzlement and persuasion may be utilised to move the ostensibly agreed upon goal-posts, as will be demonstrated at length in the next chapter.

The fluidity of labour here is unmistakable. Take the Loskor tea shop, staffed by a consistently and continually changing cast of characters, who glide in and out of the dark, open-front space as obligation and desire dictates. Attendants become patrons, *cha* makers become *mishti* purchasers. Omelettes, not on the menu, are requested and made with eggs normally sold, to the group of male card players sitting on the veranda smoking. Something comes up, someone will step in for an hour or two, for payment in kind, cash, or a few rupees subtracted from their account in the grubby red exercise book kept behind the counter in which the money owed by all those in the village is listed, totalling thousands and thousands of rupees. The porous divide between servers and customers is made more complex by those bringing money and requests on behalf of others, exchanges always

complicated by existing relations, previous debts and other invisible social obligations. Underlying this fluidity is an intense sociality and connectedness in which boundaries are not so much blurred as non-existent.

Such situations underscore the salience of earlier feminist critiques of Marxist conceptions of bounded market and non-market spheres, illustrating them to have been “illusions” (Bear, Ho, Tsing & Yanagisako 2015; Moore 1988) particularly when considering the labours of women in non-Western ethnographic contexts (Ong 1987; Strathern 1988). Instead, this situation of intersection and overlap shows that work and non-work exist in a confused, messy and general entanglement, with the two not becoming somehow more intertwined, but in fact indistinguishable in the first place.

Such indistinct boundaries pose challenges for teasing apart the rhythms of work and everyday life. Vagueness predominates, there are no fixed hours, and weather, religious holidays, family engagements and emergencies all often as not interrupt and alter the rhythms and flow of work. Remuneration, aside from those in government positions, is similarly haphazard. It is largely dependent on who you know, party loyalties and other subjective concerns. It is also often made in kind when cash is scarce, materials from a building site instead of a hundred rupees, some rice traded for cooking oil.

The approach of the majority of men here to work could best be described as a relaxed disinterest that belies their significant poverty. Many men here do not work, citing physical or mental ailments, the unavailability of anything suitable, or a superciliously delivered refusal to perform what is colloquially called *chaper-kaj* or lowly work. There are many who simply while away their hours playing cards, chatting in tea or illegal bottle shops, or sloping around the village and shooting the breeze. This was in stark contrast to the tenacity with which almost all women approached their work, shouldering of course two additional labour burdens - namely of the household and the children that were deemed to be entirely their responsibility (Sharma 1986; Lamb 2000).

The kinds of labour undertaken by women within the village are wide-ranging though for the most part unwaged and unrecognised as ‘work’ or *kaj* of equal status by men (Moore 1988; Spivak 1978). Several spend days with feet and hands buried in the rich earth, planting seeds and vegetable gardens which will provide both food and saleable commodities. Others offer their labour to the owners of fields nearby at times of harvest. They may cook in the marginally more financially comfortable households on special occasions such as weddings when there are vast numbers of mouths to feed and extra hands are needed. Similarly, they might clean or help in looking after children, particularly if a household is experiencing the strain of an impending birth or the crisis of an illness or bereavement. Those with slightly more education such as Summaya may oversee the homework of other’s children,

ensuring all complete their tasks to the requisite standard. Some raise chickens, ducks or goats, whose meat, milk or eggs may be sold or bartered, and other women fish for themselves and for a saleable catch. Then there is of course the *dadar kaj* embroidery work now undertaken by so many.

The first significant thing that differentiates women's working lives here from those of men, is that it stubbornly remains widely frowned upon for them to perform any kind of labour outside of the village. The conjunction of deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and both old and modern religiously grounded concerns (Gardner 1991; Metcalf 1998) mean there exists a widely held view that travel outside of the village by women should be avoided unless necessary.

The more recent encompassment of the area in networks of transport and communication has undoubtedly made this an easier prospect to imagine, though also one now known to be potentially dangerous. Women are thus almost always constrained to performing the kinds of work that take place inside their homesteads or within the safe confines of the village. The value placed upon such privately performed works is undoubtedly the lowest for women, though paradoxically for men a job performed indoors, privately, is the epitome of status.

There exist just three notable exceptions to this bar on women working 'outside', the first of which is to have a coveted government job. Sara and another woman in Tarakhali were primary school teachers, making their way each day down the bumpy mud path towards the Hindu dominated next-door village. Yamina and Nimra, the latter of whom we'll hear more from in the next chapter, worked as Integrated Child Development workers (ICDS), running groups in the morning for women with pre-school aged children in which they are given advice on healthcare and nutrition, along with a home-cooked, protein-rich meal and some informal education. These women were all entitled to travel outside of the village locally for work, though only within the immediate vicinity and certainly not beyond. Humeira Halder's son had travelled with her for her relatively high up post in Bariupur, and they lived there together with his own nuclear family.

The second exception is when women are engaging in *shorkari kaj* or government work, which in fact means managing the engagement between their family and local bureaucracy, as will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Finally, there are the women who have transcended the painful and poorly remunerated *dadar kaj* work to become sari brokers themselves, a process that as we shall see is in itself one only capable of being undertaken by those somehow separate to or 'outside' of other women.

Possibly reflective of this internalised labour market, the second difference between the work of women and men is for the former, a frequent absence of monetary remuneration. There exists for

women here the inescapable reality that one of the traditionally accepted hallmarks of labour, namely monetary or other financially equivalent remuneration, may be generated most effectively by them through informal means. My focus groups aside, there were figures such as Tabina, whose legendary political wrangling I will explore in Chapter 6, who was renowned for her ability to ruthlessly and efficiently capitalise on any situation in this fashion.

When the local hospital provided many children with faulty vaccinations, a crisis ensued in which the building became encircled by an angry mob of parents, irate at the mistakes that had left many children extremely sick and a handful dead. That morning, Tabina snuck into the hospital posing as a figure of authority and spent the day guiding each of the doctors to safety, for the princely sum of 100 rupees a piece. During some local election violence, she opened up her home and hid several party members under the bed, in exchange for money and assurances that she would have her name placed on several desirable welfare lists. As will be seen, this is also significantly relevant to the navigation of state bureaucracy and local politics, where timely and unpaid labour manipulating personal circumstances and influencing the choices and decisions of state others may be both financially and social productive.

Perhaps indicative of a recognition of the nonetheless productive nature of unwaged labour, or the implicit inside versus outside binary that continues to frustrate women here from even imagining, let alone undertaking, careers outside of the home, they were universal in their forceful refusal to acknowledge any differences between their work and that of men. If anything, they would comment that they would typically work harder than men, balancing housework and family obligations with other more economically productive activities. Reflective of this, over time the distinction between Shoor who spends around 10 days each month working as a day labourer on building sites, and his neighbour Aliya, whose entire day, every day, would be devoted to *dadar kaj*, tending her vegetable garden, political canvassing on behalf of the TMC or making patties out of cow dung in order to make the necessary repairs to her house after the monsoon rains had at last receded, were rendered, to women at least, as non-sensical and stigmatising.

Partha Chatterjee has identified the cultivation of the separate spheres of the public and private, or material and spiritual, within the middle-classes in India, as a necessary nationalist response to colonial subjugation (1989). Chatterjee argues that in order to reconcile the desire to embrace certain technologies of Western colonialism with that of fierce, national resistance to domination, these two became regarded as separate, gendered domains in which the role of women was unmistakably the inner, private world of “ghar” or home. In this way, Chatterjee identifies the home as the private labour domain of women not a product of tradition but rather as a relatively modern innovation (ibid

1989; Kaviraj 1997), with this division being something that continues to be reflected in studies of middle-class women in India (Donner 2008).

Yet in this context of the rural-poor, such a distinction in the gradation and valuation of labour by women on this basis doesn't hold. Women here did not consider the work of men performed publicly, outside of the home as different in quality or nature to that of their own *kaj* done within their homesteads or the confines of the village. This was illustrated most succinctly by almost every woman in the village stating emphatically that here women both worked harder and undertook a more significant amount of work than men. This is something that, as will become clear in the next section, is only more pronounced in relation to *dadar kaj*.

### *Unravelling dadar kaj*

Abu Ahmed, the *imam* of the *choto masjid*, is a slight, unimposing man with a wispy beard and glasses, which he always swaps for a pair of 1980s style, black wayfarer knockoffs when he is weaving along the winding village paths on his prized, shiny blue scooter. During one of our later conversations, once I had become accustomed to his quiet yet forceful manner and frequent desire to quote at length from the *Quran*, I asked him about what Islam had to say on women working.

In other contexts within South Asia, the links between diverse movements of Islamic reform and the identification of the home and the domestic as the sphere and responsibility of women is something that has been significantly stressed (Haniffa 2008; Marsden 2008; Metcalf 1998; 2009b). Within the discourses of the Tablighi Jama'at in Tarakhali, delivered in Sunday *madrasa* sermons or infusing the articulations of both men and women in the village, whilst the responsibility of looking after the home and raising children was identified as undeniably a female one, it lacked the sort of reverent, ceremonial significance that might have been expected.

Abu Ahmed reflected this, making no particular claims about women's special role in controlling and running a household. He instead told me calmly that according to Islam, women were permitted to work outside of the home and reside elsewhere, provided that they were staying with parents or authoritative relatives such as aunts and uncles when doing so. However, he said that as all women within Tarakhali work at home or within the village parameters this did not represent a problem.

My collaborators were adamant that no implicit contradiction between strong Islamic beliefs and praxis and working as a woman existed, despite the fact this is something the ideology of the Tablighi Jama'at might dispute (Metcalf 2009b: 241). Nura, deeply committed to her faith in a more conservative fashion than many I was close to, told me that nonetheless, one was not able to entrust



everything to God: “kichu manoush bhabche Allah sob deben...kintu ami jani ami jodi kaj na kori, ki khabo?” [some people think that God will provide everything... but I know that if I don’t work, how will I eat?].

That said, there was no sense amongst women here that the work they were undertaking, often thanklessly, was spiritually mandated, or would earn them any form of religious merit in the future. Elsewhere amongst Muslim women, the attribution of everyday struggle as a means of accruing other-worldly benefit has been observed (Smid 2010) though here this was notably lacking. If anything, when I spoke in depth to women about what they would do if they had more time to spare, they expressed frustration about a lack of opportunity to perform an adequate amount of religious praxis given their heavy workload. The extensive chores and household duties that they undertook were, if anything, thought to detract from their capacity to perform religious activities and consequently were viewed entirely negatively as opposed to being a way of engendering or securing some kind of religious, Islamic merit.

*Dadar kaj* may represent, in terms of the religious prescriptions of reformist Islam, the perfect form of work for these women to undertake. Arriving in the village around twenty years ago, it has spread in popularity to the extent of the large bamboo frame becoming a ubiquitous presence in almost every household. Requiring only the frame and the materials provided by a broker, it allows women to combine a form of pecuniary labour with household chores and responsibilities, without ever leaving the confines of their homes. A charitable view would be that this as an effective yet uncontroversial way for women to join the labour market. A negative interpretation could be that it instead represents a means to further exploit female labour power, blur their work with ‘leisure’ activities (Mies 1982; Wilkinson-Weber 1999) and frustrate their attempts to obtain more rewarding forms of work.

There exists a deep and intricately woven history of the association in India between Muslims and sewing or embroidery work (Kumar 1992; Venkatesan 2006; 2009; Wilkinson-Weber 1999). Formerly the preserve of highly skilled male artisans, in formerly Mughal Islamic centres such as Lucknow, post-independence the decline in both demand and wages has meant that there has been a notable shift in the gender of those performing this kind of labour (Wilkinson-Weber 1999: 22). There has been a further departure from urban centres to rural sites, with impoverished women such as those in Tarakhali now targeted as the ultimate cheap labour resource (Mies 1982; Wilkinson-Weber 1999).

Summaya’s husband Nasir claims to have brought *dadar kaj* to the village almost two decades ago. As a young man, he travelled to Delhi to work as a tailor’s apprentice where he saw for the first time the intricate *zari* embroidery being done by highly trained male artisans. Learning of the existence of a lower quality and less-skilled alternative, he learnt the basic embroidering techniques himself before

returning to Tarakhali where he trained an initial group of women, providing the requisite materials and selling their work in *Boro Bazaar* in Kolkata. At its height this was a thriving and extremely rewarding business for him, in which he monopolised large amounts of female labour and enforced punishing profit margins.

Over time his monopoly has been eroded. The arrival of microfinance means any woman can now take out the small loan of a thousand rupees in order to commission herself a *dadar* frame to be built. Secondly, the low barriers to entry mean the number of brokers has multiplied, with many now operating in a desperate scramble for dominance in which family and political allegiances are invoked and profit margins are tightly scrutinised. Thirdly, a serious road accident in which Nasir had lost the use of one arm and suffered significant damage meant the business operated at a fraction of what it was, having fortunately already secured his family a comfortable existence.

Of those I worked with, only a couple did not currently, or had never done, *dadar kaj*. Kaki was too old to learn she said, whilst Sara had no need, with enough income from two government jobs in the household for her leisure time to remain leisurely, shopping in [REDACTED] bazaar or watching television. Nasir now estimates that there may be around 30 brokers in total working in Tarakhali, each having around 20-30 women working underneath them. A total village female population of 2117 makes clear just how many are involved in this business (Indian Census 2011).

When first in Tarakhali, I quickly became conscious that what seemed like an initial reluctance of women to speak to me, was in fact an understandable anxiety that they would need to stop working on their embroidery whilst we chatted. The mood would quickly lift when they realised I had no problem talking to them whilst they sat stooped over the *dadar* frame, hands moving quickly, answering questions without looking up. Soon my presence in fact became a virtue, attracting children who were usually understandably apathetic and reluctant to join in, prompting them to instead sit quietly and obediently threading the glittering beads onto needles, small muddy feet twitching under the fabric, eyes fixed on me.

The women are provided with the materials for each sari by the broker and given a tight timeline in which to deliver their finished pieces. Their work is then collected and taken by the broker either to a further middle-man nearer to Kolkata, or to the city's *Boro Bazaar* itself, where the garments will finally be sold. Whilst the dynamic between the women and their broker is a straightforward one, the costing behind the relationship is not. Brokers are typically extremely cagey about how much of a margin they make on each piece, with only Malika being entirely open about how her costs were calculated and the profit she made.

Malika is one of the two female brokers in Tarakhali, and one of the most successful of them all, including her male counterparts. Her story is indicative of the possibilities that *dadar kaj* can open up, particularly for those for whom more traditional paths have increasingly become ones they are unable to follow.

[REDCATED]

Figure 14: Malika counting microfinance group contributions

When I learnt from her relative that Malika was the first female broker in the village and was now the primary bread-winner responsible for their sprawling household, I returned that same afternoon when I was promised she would be at home after her trip to the bazaar. I recognised her instantly from one of the microfinance groups, the first I had visited, in which she serves as the fiery group leader who challenges both group members and the loan officer alike for any perceived breach of common sense and morality. Here she was quieter, demurer in her red, yellow and black spotted sari as we sat on plastic chairs in the shade outside her storeroom, though there existed a steeliness that underlies her soft-spoken demeanour.

Malika was married at only 12 years-old. She quickly gave birth to a daughter and lived happily with her husband and his family in a village not too far away from Tarakhali. After some time, he began to speak openly about taking a second wife, the practice of which and the woman he was suggesting she was vehemently opposed to. Consequently, when her husband disregarded her wishes and took a new bride, she left, returning in disgrace to her father's house with her young daughter. At this point many would have resigned themselves to a life of hardship and domestic servitude, reliant on the goodwill of family members themselves under financial strain to look after her and her child. Not Malika.

Discovering that some women in the village had started doing embroidery work, she quickly learnt the skills herself, laughing shyly when describing how she would sit for hours just watching them work. This was around 20 years ago, and she has been doing *dadar kaj* work ever since. More recently, she began to resent the profit margin that capitalised on women's labour to the broker's advantage, and the unchanging amount being paid by brokers, repeating Aliya's refrain: 'eki kaj, paisa kom' [same work, less money]. One day she was on a bus going to visit her sister in another nearby village with some of the saris she had sown. A man next to her began to ask her about the work, showing interest in the quality of what she was producing given her limited resources. Details were exchanged, and over some time and further conversations, they resolved to start a business.

Using a Bandhan Group microfinance loan and the help of a local NGO from which she also took out a loan, she procured enough money to get started. After years of doing the work, Malika had realised that there was space to make a bigger profit margin by sourcing the materials locally herself in [REDACTED] bazaar nearby, as opposed to relying on a further broker or travelling to *Boro Bazaar*, where these things were inevitably more expensive. Thus though her business partner provided the saris from Kolkata itself, she sourced (and continues to do so) everything else from the local bazaar. Rising from her chair, she moved to the open door of the darkened storeroom and flicked a switch, gesturing for us to come and take a look. Inside were piles and piles of saris stacked against the walls, plastic bags engorged with beads, and Malika raising an eyebrow.

Malika estimated that she required around R20,000 of materials in order to begin a functioning business. The saris that women here produce for her are far more intricately designed and finished to a much higher standard than those I saw elsewhere in the village. As they consequently require many more hours of labour, she accordingly pays between R300 - R500 per piece. The materials will cost her a further R200. By selling each piece for R900, she will therefore make between R200-R400 for every sari. Currently there are 24 women working for her, which factoring in any other costs such as transportation, means her net income is somewhere around R6000 each month. However, she said smiling, with more than a hint of pride, she estimates the business to now be worth around ten times that.

The garments produced by those working for Malika were undeniably of a superior quality to the often cheap looking and slap dash efforts of many others in Tarakhali. Nonetheless, she continued to face challenges, particularly as labour in this contested marketplace, though plentiful, was variable in quality and could be bought and sold with ease. She worried about how she would pay for her daughter to continue studying, given her ambitious plans to become both a nurse and a teacher. Malika had a further concern, having (in a pattern familiar to developing economies) become someone responsible for supporting almost their entire extended family. With an aged father, an incapacitated elder brother and two other brothers engaged in the precarious and irregular labour of construction and van driving, she was now contributing around two thousand rupees each month to the general family income. The family had come to depend on her.

Malika's story provides an illuminating example of how *dadar kaj* can provide dynamic and determined women in incredibly challenging circumstances with opportunities. Yet it is also worth noting that Malika was in a unique position when she capitalised on the flowering *dadar kaj* industry. Most crucially, she was separated from her husband, meaning that she was already socially stigmatised and considered to a certain extent an aberration or outcast, and secondly, as a direct result of this, she lacked a household to run. The conjunction of this already denigrated social status with its entailed freedoms and absence of the burden of domestic labour undoubtedly have assisted in her steady economic ascension.

Farida, a cheery *mota-chota* (chubby) lady and mother of four daughters, is the second female sari broker and in similarly unusual circumstances. Her husband claims he is unable to physically work, refusing to take some of the day labourer roles on offer that he considers beneath him. His is an old family here, that I learn over time to have been one of the few *zamindar* land owners that used to proliferate in this part of West Bengal. The agrarian reforms introduced under the Left Front that stripped such individuals of their power had rendered his family increasingly impoverished though too proud to adjust to their newfound circumstances.

Farida has four daughters, one studying medicine at an Islamic university in Bariupur on a scholarship, and the other three at local schools with similarly high aspirations, something extremely unusual in Tarakhali. A combination of her daughters' academic prowess, her husband's former land-owning status, and the family's evident need combined to enable her to similarly contravene the rigid social norms and run a modestly successful brokering business.

What about those women who are not somehow already marginalised or highly distinct through circumstance? At this point I will consider the booming microfinance industry in this village and the changes it has created since its arrival. In doing so I will aim to show its inherent flaws as a model enacted here, the result of which is that women's aspirations are curtailed, and their labour power becomes even more significantly exploited.

### *The Limits of Microfinance: the Inside / Outside Binary*

The air is still, stifling as we sit on mats on the floor towards the back of the empty space that will gradually fill with women over the next ten minutes. They arrive in fits and starts, some alone and others in giggling groups, chatting, fanning themselves, seeking a comfortable spot, shuffling up and making space for one another. Small children too young for school and unable to be left with a sister or mother-in-law sprawl hotly on laps or on the floor. The loan agent arrives in his customary yellow shirt and starched pale blue jeans, saris are pulled over heads and tattered pale blue Bandhan loan books are removed carefully from plastic and canvas bags. A hush falls - the meeting begins.

Gatherings such as these are a regular occurrence in Tarakhali since the arrival here many years ago of microfinance, primarily in the form of the Bandhan Bank<sup>23</sup>. Each group will contain between 20-50 women and will meet weekly, either on a Wednesday or Saturday morning. The length of meetings varies, depending on the number of women, the speed at which repayments are made and the money counted, and the inevitable issues surrounding certain absent members or absent payments which lead to challenge, heated debate and begrudging resolution.

Loans are taken out by these women for either one or two years, with repayment and interest rates varying with the term of the loan. Amounts ranging from as little as one or two thousand rupees up to 1.5 lakh (£1,500) can be borrowed, though the larger amounts will be classed as a business loan requiring additional documentation. In order to open an account and take out a loan, alongside the

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<sup>23</sup> The Bandhan Bank, established in West Bengal in 2001, was responsible for the vast majority of microfinance activity in the village although the Jagaran Bank was also minimally active.

correctly completed paperwork a woman needs just one thing: a male guarantor in order to sign for them.

Microloan and microcredit are simultaneously valorised as the solution to endemic gendered poverty, and roundly condemned as the marketisation of the poor in which blunt neo-liberal instruments trade forms of state care for market access (Kabeer 2005; Visvanathan and Yoder 2011). Many have noted the need for nuance in such discussions, with the effectiveness or otherwise of microfinance schemes tightly indexed to particular contexts and circumstances (Kabeer 2005). Reflecting this, in what follows my analysis, through drawing on wider commentary and debates, is specific to microfinance as currently instantiated in Tarakhali.

In this village as elsewhere, there exists a fundamental flaw in assuming a straightforward corollary between microfinance presence and female empowerment (Kar 2017; Visvanathan and Yoder 2011). This is largely due to the institutional philosophy and approach of the Bandhan Bank itself, as with other microfinance institutions (MFIs). This is one in which empowerment is identified solely in terms of access to capital through group-lending, and thus taken to be “a discrete outcome... separating it from its original meaning of transformed power relations in the household or in public spaces” (Visvanathan and Yoder 2011: 52).

This is problematic for two distinct reasons. Firstly, it encourages microfinance involvement to be assessed in extremely narrow terms allowing for the arguably self-serving assumption that should women both gain access to capital and make their repayments successfully that by default, ‘empowerment’ has been achieved. Secondly, it enables the Bandhan Bank as with many other MFIs to disaggregate social transformation into distinct spheres, in which their only responsibility and involvement is that of female access to the financial sphere in the form of capital and the market.

The conjunction of these two issues produces several flaws in microfinance as it is enacted here, the first of which is its stubborn re-enforcement of existing gender stereotypes. There appears an inherent contradiction amongst MFIs in their purported aim of alleviating poverty and enhancing women’s status, with their comfortable embrace of existing and often prejudiced gender norms, observed prominently in India (Kar 2017).

The requirement for a male guarantor in order for a woman to be able to apply for a loan is just the first way in which this occurs. In requesting the guarantee of a male relative, these organisations tacitly assume both a male financial buoyancy that is often absent in this village, and a patriarchal structure in which their consent would be necessary in order for a woman to take out the loan in the first place. Though this is almost always given, usually by their husbands, in cases where a woman is

divorced or widowed this may be more complex. Women such as Malika relied on their elderly fathers, whilst some in a similar predicament would ask others such as brothers-in-law or next-door neighbours.

The official requirement for a male figure may lead to what some have noted to be male control over microfinance loans within households and, in more extreme cases, the deterioration of gender relationships and increase in domestic violence stemming from group membership (Goetz & Sen Gupta 1996). Within Tarakhali, given that almost all of my collaborators were current or former members of MFIs, any relationship with violence was too difficult to quantify, though there was never any articulated direct link. What was clear however was that men both controlled the loan money received, and often gave little thought to how it would be repaid, something underscored for me by attending meeting after meeting in which women would arrive sheepishly and murmur about their inability to make a repayment as their husband had taken the money.

A second defect in microfinance in this village is the complete absence of any forms of training and up-skilling offered to women in conjunction with taking out a loan. The majority of group members are illiterate and largely uneducated, having been typically removed from formalised education at an age of around 12 or 13 in order to help with domestic chores or more likely to be married. Consequently, their ability to utilise their loan effectively is significantly hampered by their existing lack of skills and constricted aspirational horizons. They will thus almost always end up doing the deeply familiar but highly exploitative *dadar kaj* work, mirroring those around them in the village.

Ironically, women here are rarely even able to become microfinance loan officers themselves. This is not due to an explicit organisational prohibition but the perceived safety risk of young women travelling alone by bike down the frequently remote paths connecting these villages which means that very few were able to, and only on routes which would not require such potentially perilous journeys. A story of a female loan officer dragged off a bike and raped elsewhere in the area circulated in hushed whispers and was often cited in explanations for why no-one would even consider it.

Thirdly, one could argue given their uniquely privileged position within the social fabric of these communities, that it is deeply neglectful that Bandhan Bank offer no attempts at educating the male population with respect to gender equality. Their unique status as a non-governmental actor but with significant social capital means that, whilst undoubtedly complex, this is something that could certainly be trialled. Favourable repayment rates linked to the completion of a training seminar, or a small (yet here significant) offering in kind for a similar completion are ways that this could potentially be explored.



A failure to do this means that the ostensibly poverty ameliorating benefits of micro-credit participation are undercut by several factors existing in reality. In Tarakhali, women rarely had control over the money that they made through their *dadar kaj* work, in fact often struggling to make the weekly repayments after the misappropriation of funds by their husbands for alcohol, gambling or other such illicit activities. Nor does their social status change, reflecting their new monetary access and increased labour output.

Instead, they become further embroiled in a tight mesh of ‘domestic’ chores, in which their work is misconstrued as a leisure activity (Mies 1982; Wilkinson-Weber 1999). The structures and dynamics of the home and the household, as they remain a realm such MFI organisations “prefer not to tread” (Mayoux 1999: 969), simply stretch and expand to accommodate a new, deeply taxing form of badly remunerated labour, whilst the inside and outside labour boundary remains steadfast. That loan meetings always take place within various different houses within the village only further enforces this.

Such issues surrounding gender disparity are arguably even more heightened within a Muslim community. In an interview with the regional head of the Bandhan group in their offices in Gosaba on the island across the water from Tarakhali, he explained that he saw a sharp disparity in the use of microfinance loans within Hindu and Muslim communities. For Hindu women, their role was to act as a conduit for the money for their husbands or other male relatives, who would then typically use it to start small businesses themselves such as selling tea or samosas at train stations for example. In contrast for Muslim women, almost all would use the money themselves to purchase the requisite frame for *dadar kaj*, any remainder going to their husbands as spending money, which the women not the men would then be responsible for earning through hard work in order to make the repayment.

My interlocutor, in perhaps a display characteristic of many lower middle-class educated Hindus in India at this present time, attributed this sharp disparity to a pervasive complacency and misogyny amongst Muslim men here where Muslim women cannot freely divorce their husbands. Having witnessed a female initiated divorce take place in Tarakhali, I would suggest a more nuanced view and one that will be explored more deeply in the next chapter, which highlights how hostile the public sphere is for Muslim men at this particular moment in India, which may make labour opportunities scarce and that has resulted in my female collaborators becoming the key players in engagement with local bureaucracy.

The instantiation of microfinance in Tarakhali through the Bandhan Bank thus overwhelmingly replicates the primary criticism made of microfinance at what Kabeer has identified as the overarching, philosophical level (2005) in reference to the orientation and ethos underpinning such

organisations. This is that, in essence, Bandhan prioritises its own interests as a banking business, making a profit from the labour of poor women through lending to them at high rates of interest. Though claiming that poverty is alleviated through otherwise unimaginable market access for marginal impoverished women, in reality they become doubly exploited through extremely low wages for painstaking labour for which they buy their own tools, using loans from banks which, in turn, profit from their productivity too.

Further, though ostensibly about group co-operation, such interventions are actually neo-liberally, individualistically driven (Kar 2017). Thus whilst women are ostensibly forming groups with which to borrow money, there exists the underlying onus on individuals helping themselves (Huang 2016) in order to change their own circumstances. In the absence of any other NGO or development focused organisations working within Tarakhali at the moment, by dominating the landscape in this way, more often than not, the Bandhan Bank appears to be “burdening them with debt and diverting resources from more effective empowerment strategies” (Mayoux 1999: 977).

There is a final additional and as yet unsubstantiated flaw of the microfinance model functioning in Tarakhali at present that may blight future generations of women, namely the taxing involvement of young girls in *dadar kaj*. It was not long after I had begun to visit the village when I discovered Reenu sitting in the compound behind the family tea shop, nimbly working on her own *dadar kaj*. Determined to save some of her own money in order to pursue her dream of becoming a police officer, she was now working most mornings and evenings in the tea shop and spending her afternoons doing sewing work to earn a few hundred rupees each week. Aliya’s daughter Jaccaria would frequently be seen alongside her mother at the *dadar* frame, helping before and after school and during the long, still evenings.

The typical obligation of all women within a household to labour “serially upon the same item” (Wilkinson-Weber 1999: 100) means that for younger girls and women, instead of homework, studying or even playing, they are working supporting their mothers from an age of around just 12 years-old. This often culminates with girls falling behind and dropping out of school, meaning that for all but a handful of girls they will lack the qualifications necessary in order to aim for higher forms of employment and firmly push against this inside and outside labour binary. Only longer-term studies of the effects of microfinance within Tarakhali will reveal the true impact of their gendered obligation (Kabeer 2005).

### *The Darker Side of Labour*

There is a darker side to the labour of women in Tarakhali. In addition to the present discomforts and future limitations of the *dadar kaj* work and engagement with microfinance as just explored, there are more sinister ways in which women's work has come to represent a tool of oppression as well as fault line that if crossed, can prove fatal.

It is during one of the regular evening power cuts that plunge us into a nightly darkness from around six to nine pm. We are sitting, legs drawn up on a cot in Rashida's house, our faces shadowy slivers of orange illuminated by light of the single gas lamp. Rashida is beautiful even as a flicker against the blackness, her wide eyes and unselfconscious smile flashing as they catch the glow of the small flame. She is showing us examples of her work, beautifully sewn prayer mats in vivid Islamic greens, reds and whites, blankets made from old pieces of material lovingly stitched together and elegant wicker mats that she makes only during certain months of the year when the necessary grasses are growing in the fields around her house in abundance.

Hers was a love marriage - they had met when she was just fifteen. She unwraps a carefully preserved though creased photograph from their wedding in which they stand stern and unsmiling, resembling with their striking looks and sombre faces disgruntled film stars as opposed to newlyweds. Her husband died just two years later of a stroke (the ubiquitous term used here for any sudden or unexplained death) leaving her and a young daughter. Then a financial burden on her father-in-law and deemed by him to be too great an enticement for the young men and boys of the village, she was married quickly, grief-stricken, to her husband's younger brother.

Though he is kind, she says she does not love her husband. He spends most of the year in Kashmir working as a tailor, returning only for a couple of the cooler winter months in order to deliver financial remittances and see their children. Denied any financial control for the remaining months, Rashida has begun to make things as a means of having a small income for herself in order to purchase things for the children, Eid, or the occasional new item of clothing for herself. It also helps her to combat loneliness she says, during these long, dark evenings when her children are asleep and there is no-one else for company.

Rashida is one of the luckier ones. Many other women in Tarakhali who find themselves alone at a young age either due to death or due to spousal abandonment face a far more difficult prospect. In these circumstances, when not sent back to the homes of their parents in disgrace, unlikely to ever be wed again, they are retained in the households in which they have married into in roles analogous to those of unpaid domestic servants.

This was the case of Harina, whose reluctance and embarrassment during our first conversation I misinterpreted as shyness. After several faltering and protracted exchanges, each ultimately tapering into silence, she stated quietly that her husband had moved to Kerala and taken a second wife, and she had not seen or spoken to him for more than four years. The negative extent of this relationship became more transparent when she explained that *dadar kaj* work she was doing as we spoke consumed her days and was deemed essential in order for her to provide some financial contribution to the household. This when her husband's sister arrived home, a plump and jolly woman who in addition to Sara, is the other female primary school teacher in the village. Otherwise a charming interlocutor, without even looking at Harina she ordered her to boil water and make tea, before barking at her from an inner room to start preparing the lunchtime meal.

A similar situation was replicated in many households across the village. My gentle probing as to the nature of women's relationships with their husbands would be met firstly with silence or evasion, before after maybe an hour of stilted chat and uncomfortable silences they would reveal their predicament, as something clasped tightly to their chests in shame. There was a challenge in the eyes of some, questioning whether I would offer judgement when all I actually felt was anger and sadness on their behalf.

It is worth noting again here that there exists a highly complex relationship between men and their extended families with the women who join their households as wives and daughters-in-law, and their relation to labour. Due to the deeply ingrained propensity to live as part of larger 'joint' families, still universal here in Tarakhali and stubbornly prominent across India more widely (Uberoi 2004), parents and their sons and unmarried daughters, with the formers' accompanying partners and children, all reside together. This greater proximity between these women and their extended families causes predictable friction. Kaki stated that her primary motivation for marrying Mubarak was so that the running of the household would finally be removed from her own frail shoulders, only to become frustrated with the ineptitude and laziness of his bride Nusrat who then herself became caught by a *jinn*. In more extreme scenarios, these relationships can become exploitative, damaging and in the worst cases, abusive. For women abandoned in households where they are no longer wanted, their tireless and unrewarded labour is seen as a necessary price for their financial social burden.

Allegations relating to a certain kind of work, sometimes termed the oldest profession, remain a way with which to thoroughly discredit those whose behaviour is not approved of within the community. This was true in the case of Aksha. As proprietress of the Loskor tea shop on the road where I would so often spend parts of my mornings, Aksha made almost daily trips to the bazaar alone in order to buy the supplies necessary for the shop, sometimes spending several hours in the dusty, frenetic town. This was in contrast to most other women, whose perhaps weekly forays would be quick affairs in the

company of a neighbour or relation, or who would not venture out at all instead relying on their husbands or the travelling vendors who would come selling things from door to door.

As I began to be drawn in deeper to the scandals encircling her family, which in fact centred upon her daughter Rojida's perceived impropriety, I became increasingly aware of the intimations that Aksha was working as a prostitute. People would tell me pointedly that they could not understand how she spent so many hours in the bazaar, 'ki korche?! sob somoy kaj korche...' [What is she doing? all the time she is working...].

I had learnt in the recent weeks that the Loskor family were in severe financial difficulties. As previously mentioned, Aksha's husband Ali-Hami had lost his job driving a rickshaw due to a troubling eye condition, a lie as I knew from a hurriedly delivered confession from her teenage daughter that this was in fact due to a conviction for drunk driving. The family's troubled only son was not only unable to work after a tragic accident in which he ran over and killed a young girl with a lorry, but the victim's family were demanding two lakhs<sup>24</sup> compensation in a police case that was still ongoing.

Aksha's strident attempts to reassert control over the direction of her troubled family, the disregard for convention and the stern and abrasive way in which she held herself and conducted her business were certainly more fitting of a man here. What others saw was that something deeper was amiss. Soon I was made privy to whispered rumours that there was a flat above one of the rickety shops in the bazaar where she was said to be working. The swirling speculations culminated in a hushed conversation one night by the roadside, accosted by Sara when gingerly making our way back towards the scooter during the regular power cut, using the dim light from the torch on my phone. She articulated in words I didn't understand (and had to the embarrassment of Kishore to ask him to explicitly explain) that Aksha was working as a prostitute. Further, she said that by associating with her and her family, I risked bringing my own reputation in the community into dispute. "I feel for you like sister, it is for your safety I tell you this" she said in her halting English, tentative and softly spoken from lack of practice.

Unable to ascertain the truth of these rumours without consequences, and due to other and unrelated misgivings about the family, I reluctantly began to place some distance between myself and the Loskors. The veracity of these speculations holds less significance for me than why they were so forcefully and frequently delivered. As gossip and rumour may often unsurprisingly indicate inherent anxieties within communities, in this instance they seemed inextricably linked to the dominant role she had taken within her family and her refusal to submit to the accepted working practices of women.

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<sup>24</sup> R200,000.

In one case I came to know about, the attempt by a woman to work was met with appalling consequences. One day over a smouldering cooking fire, strong arms briskly stirring the *mangsho* in the pan to stop it from sticking, Nura began to tell me about one of her sisters. “mara gaeche” she said quickly [she’s dead]. She had been their father’s favourite, bright and always active, either assisting with the farming that supported them or helping various male family members with political canvassing. Once married, she was adamant that she wanted to keep working in some capacity or other.

She asked her husband to buy her fabric so that she could make blankets to sell, or to allow her to do the *dadar kaj* that so many others did, requests he flatly refused. After many months in which her family became increasingly concerned about her situation, there was a confrontation in which she told him that, if he continued to refuse, that she was going to leave and return to her father’s house, requesting a divorce. He picked up a broom and struck her several times over the head, killing her.

He was arrested and convicted for her murder, in spite of a desperate attempt to make it appear like a suicide, tying a sari around her neck and hoisting her from a beam in their small house before calling the police and her family to tell them calmly that she had taken her own life. He was in prison for twelve years, though is now out on remand. Nura has seen him once, sitting on the back of someone’s scooter, making their way down the main tarmac road that cuts through the jungle in front of her house, staring straight ahead.

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In this village, as with many others in this region, the transformations of increased connectivity and the arrival of microfinance institutions here have drawn women into the labour market. Yet as these darker aspects of gendered labour illustrate, though the landscape has undergone significant changes in the preceding two decades, significant issues stubbornly persist.

Across India, many have noted the sense of women possessing “a special place of honour and dominance in the home and family life” (Sen 2011: 154) (Chatterjee 1989; Uberoi 2004). For many Hindu women there is a deeply, spiritually ingrained valorising of such a conception of female household management found amongst the urban Bengali middle-classes (Donner 2008; Sarkar 2001) as well as amongst adherents to Hindutva inspired movements such as the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra (Bedi 2011). This is not confined to Hinduism, and though possessing links to older Islamic forms of *purdah* practices (Jeffery 1979; Lateef 1990) it is also identified as something prevalent in the more recent teachings of various reformist Islamic movements (Haniffa 2008; Marsden 2008).

As has been underscored, such a conception of the household as the distinguished, somehow spiritually potent domain of women is not present in Tarakhali. The women themselves do not understand or interpret the domestic sphere as one that is under their control, though are frustrated by the fact that all the *ghorer-kaj* (housework) is their responsibility. “baritey mohila sob kaj kore..ki kosto!” [At home, women do all the work...what hardship!] was often something said by women as they wiped sweat from their foreheads, in the constant swirl of movement that characterises their mornings. Further, unlike Muslim women elsewhere (Smid 2010) they draw no links between this labour and a place in *jannah* in the afterlife.

Crucially, they do not ‘control’ the household in any significant way. Amongst those married, aside from Aliya, whose husband has become so unwell that she has now taken control of their household, not a single one of my collaborators had any kind of ownership over the household’s finances. Many do not travel to the market to do the shopping (instead relying on their husbands or another male relative to choose the produce for them) or waiting each morning for the door-to-door vendors who visit the village, meaning something as straightforward as what they will eat for lunch that day remains elusively beyond their control.

This if anything is reinforced by microfinance as it is instantiated here. The instrument of this potentially revolutionary labour transformation, the Bandhan Bank, has both incorrectly assumed that access to market would naturally lead to further empowerment amongst women (Mayoux 1999) and adopted a definition of empowerment that doesn’t require wider and more sweeping changes (Visvanathan and Yoder 2011). The failure to in any way target wider female empowerment or gender dynamics mean the result is that microfinance as engaged with by women here has been limitedly effective in ameliorating the effects of extreme poverty. This reflects broader acknowledgements that MFIs are “less able to deal with problems of financial exclusion when they reflect social exclusion in situations of structural inequality” (Kabeer 2005: 4717).

There are a handful of notable exceptions. As Malika’s story indicates, women who are able to access financial capital and deploy it in an unconstrained way may enjoy extremely powerful benefits of market access, removing their financial precarity and overcoming social stigma. Yet Malika was somehow already ‘outside’ of the normally dense mesh of social and domestic restrictions and obligations that govern women’s interactions with MFIs here. She herself attributes the absence of a household to run as one of the most significant factors that enabled her to pursue and succeed in her business fulltime.

Elsewhere in India, other variations of microfinance and microcredit have been suggested as offering better opportunities. Self-Help Groups, for example, in which women “own, manage and control”

(Kalpana 2011: 55) the size of loans and the rates of repayment provide an element of autonomy and control that is lacking here. However, they too are recognised as restricted by wider social dynamics, in which women remain subject to unequal and stigmatising relationships with (male) “more powerful institutional actors” (Kalpana 2011: 56).

Setting aside these longer-term, more radical transformative possibilities, in the short-term engagement with microfinance and *dadar kaj* does provide women with access to capital that can be used to stave off the immediate challenges of poverty. School and tuition fees, dowry payments and basic food stuffs were all things identified by women that they may purchase with much needed loan money. Yet they also articulated significant dislike for the Bandhan Bank, the punishing repayment rates matched by their constant struggle, as women in their circumstances, to earn enough to meet them.

In practice, this trial and then rejection of microfinance as a solution was underscored by the slightly older generation of women such as Aksha, Tabina and Aliya, who having previously taken out loans from Bandhan Bank and successfully repaid them, were no longer members of any microfinance groups. Only longer-term research can identify if this will be a pervasive trend, in which women undertake a limited engagement before ultimately deciding they are better off on their own.

Though a now ubiquitous term within the development discourse, understanding female empowerment as “the ability to make choices” (Kabeer 1999: 436) allows for the recognition of women’s work here as a continually frustrated and disempowering arena. *shorkari kaj* represents a notable exception to this, in which women are not only making their own decisions but further are doing so outside of the village. It is to this kind of female labour here that I now turn.



[REDACTED]

Figure 15: Waiting for a microfinance meeting to begin

## Chapter Six - “Being seen”: Bureaucratic Entanglements and Gendered Politics

I first heard Tabina before I saw her. Her loud, guttural voice had punctured the midday heat as she walked down the dirt path that lead from the tarmac road towards the village interior, passing her own front door to the neighbouring house where I was sitting. She came into view, a short, stout woman in a bright red and purple intricately patterned sari, a *tabiz* protection amulet wound tightly around her upper arm, the black cord biting into her flesh.

Thrusting her flimsy shopping bags down, she winced in pain and adjusted her stance to rest against the door frame. The bad hip bearing the scars of a hysterectomy, a ruptured appendix and an ovarian tumour that has seen her cut open in the local hospital three times, was thrust out into the door way. Glowering at the assembled company, she worked her characteristic, vivid red mixture of tobacco and *paan* firmly into her cheek, before telling us of the bureaucratic tribulations she had endured that morning.

“ki gorom”...[what heat]. “I had to go and speak to someone about the food security list. There is a man, you know him?” [a glance to one of the assembled company, a rapid-fire conversation about the person in question, a nod of cajoled assent] “Well. He is the one tasked with filing the food security forms, but he is asking for a hundred rupees to get all of the correct paperwork together, check it over and then submit it for consideration. One hundred rupees! For every person...ghush khay [He eats bribes] - They eat bribes these people. 25 kilos of rice if your name is on the list...I understand the dirty tricks he’s pulling, fine, but I just kept saying to him - will my name be on the list?”

I would learn over time that such refrains were commonplace. During the countless hours I discussed bureaucracy with women in Tarakhali, there emerged recurrent and familiar themes: confusion over what state provisions were available, and who was entitled to them (Gupta 1995); the challenges of access involving unofficial brokers, self-appointed gatekeepers, bribery and corruption; and the robust, pragmatic enjoyment with which these encounters were undertaken. Underlying these was perhaps the most surprising thing of all: it was women here who were typically those who engaged with the local state, politics and bureaucracy.

Tabina continued, her dark, flashing eyes alighting on my research assistant Kishore<sup>25</sup>. Stuffing more *paan* into her cheek, Tabina pushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead and said “*bhai*, I have heard that if you can dig up to your chest you will get a hundred rupees...?”. In doing so, she amusingly

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<sup>25</sup> Kishore had previously conducted village surveys on behalf of the local block development office and was thus seen by my collaborators as someone with insight into local bureaucratic machinations.

couched the government's much lauded NREGA<sup>26</sup> scheme intended to provide an annual one hundred days of waged, unskilled, manual labour for the most impoverished communities, in comfortable colloquialism.

Kishore began to respond when she silenced him with an out-turned palm, our presence allowing for a particularly enjoyable moment of grandstanding. She spat a jet of reddened spittle into the dust outside the house before hissing "after the work has been done...if he doesn't give me one hundred rupees...I will climb out of the hole, put my feet on his chest and demand the money!".

Though the colour and ferocity with which Tabina delivered the above harangue are characteristic of her fiery personality, there are some fundamental elements to this incident indicative of the experiences, and the articulations of bureaucracy made by all women in Tarakhali. The strange duality of the frustration at the inadequacies, and acceptance of the corruptions of the state observed elsewhere (Das 2015; Gupta 1995; Parry 2000; Mathur 2017; Ruud 2001); the need to urgently and forcefully articulate a rebuke, even though no-one may be listening; the steadfast belief in one's ability to inflect and alter outcomes; and, the willingness to grapple with local bureaucracy and even take pleasure in doing so.

Though often illiterate, largely uneducated and enmeshed in locally rooted socially and religiously conservative cultures, it was nonetheless almost always women in this village who were the ones to engage with the organs and actors of the state. Morning chores would be abandoned, baths had, a *baire* [outside] sari put on, before they would cram themselves into overpacked autos headed for town, line the waiting halls of government offices and bribe and charm their way into achieving their desired bureaucratic outcomes. While I will focus my discussion predominantly on Tabina, her experiences are representative of many of the women in the village, whose own varied interactions I will weave into this chapter.

In what follows, my central aim will be the exploration of how it is that the women of Tarakhali are utilising these encounters with the Indian state in order to "be seen" (Street 2012). I will use this idea as so evocatively explored in the work of Street, who in her ethnography of a dilapidated, former colonial hospital in Papua New Guinea examines the way in which citizens seek to overcome their socio-economic precarity, and related government indifference, and render themselves unable to be overlooked (2014). In doing so, the site of the hospital becomes a space "for making persons visible and knowable in new unpredictable ways" (Street 2014: 13) in a way analogous to the potential

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<sup>26</sup> The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREA) came into force in India 2005 and is intended to provide rural households with 100 days of waged, unskilled manual labour typically involved in state infrastructures projects. See Mathur 2017.

embodied for these women within the dusty corridors and run-down bureaucratic offices near Tarakhali.

I will however extend this idea of being seen one step further, for the women in this village do not only wish to be seen but to be seen in a way that is of their choosing. As will become clear this is not something that is fixed, rather shifting and evolving in different contexts and at different moments. Most significantly, the wish is to be seen is seen as something more than the everyday domestic labels to which their female identities are typically confined.

Reflective of both this theoretical and ethnographic orientation, what follows will bring a much needed gendered perspective to interactions between individuals and the Indian state. So often in such explorations, the gender of both state actors themselves and those seeking their counsel becomes erased or overlooked, thus obscuring the ways that gender dynamics can either hinder or in my case, facilitate, such interactions unfolding.

In order to explore these encounters between women and local bureaucracy, it is necessary to begin with how the state both exists and is vividly imagined as existing here. There is an underlying ordinariness (Anjaria 2011; 2016) and intimacy to these bureaucratic and political representations and experiences, underscored through the use of the language of kinship, food and familiar rebuke. I will then explore the areas of official documents, elections and interactions with local bureaucratic individuals as the three key ways in which women here work to “be seen” (Street 2012: 2014) by the state, and in doing so consider the conditions that have enabled them to adopt the unusual role of female bureaucratic gatekeepers on behalf of their community. Throughout I will continuously underscore the conflicted, overlapping, contested and dynamic nature of these imaginations and encounters, that amidst deeply challenging circumstances and existences, have come to ultimately embody for women here, as with others elsewhere (Anjaria 2011; 206 Street 2012; 2014), spaces of possibility.

### *Imagining Bureaucracy*

In what follows there exist two central tensions. The first is that my interactions and representations are unapologetically one-sided, focusing on the way in which women in Tarakhali encounter bureaucratic regimes and participate in politics. In prioritising the everyday experiences of those on the margins struggling to negotiate a relationship, I join others who have taken a similarly bottom-up view of the Indian state (Anjaria 2011; Bear 2015; Banerjee 2008; 2014; Parry 2000; Shah 2010). Thus though this chapter lacks the insights of low level bureaucrats so illuminating elsewhere (Gupta 2012; Mathur 2016) what becomes clear is that the categories of bureaucrat and outsider are not

always water-tight, and that the understandings of the gap between them viewed from one side can be deeply illuminating for both.

The second tension is one inherent within the ethnographic context itself, which is that people in Tarakhali, as elsewhere across India, hold remarkably contradictory and conflicting views about the state. This has been something particularly noted around the seemingly all-encompassing issue of corruption, practices that are vehemently criticised, reluctantly accepted and happily undertaken (Anjaria 2011; Das 2015; Mathur 2017). By focusing on such contradictions for women here, I hope to provide a nuanced picture of how people maintain different understandings of the state, and themselves, simultaneously, and will reflect the calls of others in noting the divergences between the way people talk about these things and the way in which they “do’ politics” (Banerjee 2008: 64).

There are three key moments of encounter in Tarakhali in which people focused their bureaucratic and political articulations and activities: documents, elections, and interactions with local bureaucrats. These quotidian yet vivid sites of enquiry have been explored in depth elsewhere across South Asia (Banerjee 2008; 2014; Gupta 1995; 2012 Hull 2012; Mathur 2016) and underscored as the kinds of actual and conceptual spaces where such political and bureaucratic processes and machinations reveal their forceful and affective natures (Bear 2007a; 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2007; Tuckett 2015).

Anjaria has termed the sites of encounter between individuals and the Indian state as “ordinary spaces of negotiation” (Anjaria 2011: 58). In doing so, he draws our attention to the remarkable and surprising “proximity” (Anjaria 2011: 60) of the state and bureaucracy to those leading lives blighted by issues stemming from a deeply precarious citizenship across India (Bear & Mathur 2015; Krishna 2017; Singh 2016). Through the deployment of the term ‘negotiation’ however (Anjaria 2011), we are also encouraged to recognise that these are not unilateral processes, but dynamic encounters in which (in spite of deep, structural, imbalances) individuals are able to undertake projects of strategic representation and personal gain.

The ordinary spaces (Anjaria 2011) in which women experience and engage with bureaucracy here are centred at the levels of the *gram* (village) *panchayats*. Based on a Gandhian vision of village autonomy and governance, the panchayat system was adopted as early as 1957 in West Bengal, before being formally introduced with a 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Indian constitution in 1992 in an attempt to introduce greater political decentralisation. Each village (or in practice cluster of villages) elects a leader to be their head of the *gram* panchayat. Then a group of villages, normally around 15, will elect an individual to be the *pradhan* (head) of this group or *onchol*, as well as an assistant *pradhan*. Above this there exists the block level or *panchayat samiti*, which for women here was [REDACTED] Community Development block, though the office was to be found over the water in

the neighbouring town of Sonarkhali. At this level, the staff are fulltime government employees and are tasked with the larger more administrative functions of local bureaucracy, including the distribution of funds, overall area infrastructure improvement and implementation of community development programmes.

Officially, each of these different levels of bureaucratic administration have varying functions and responsibilities. In practice, for women here they existed in a jumble of multifarious layers with unclear boundaries. In part as a result of these overlapping systems, for my collaborators there were five key bureaucratic locations that populated their worlds: the local *onchol* office in [REDACTED]; the block development office in Sonarkhali; the Canning Sub-division office and police headquarters (for more significant and serious matters); and, the local [REDACTED] *thana* or police station.

There is a marked uniformity to these spaces, both locally and across post-colonial South Asia (Hull 2012; Gupta 2013). Outside the decaying buildings are crowded and congested courtyards, groups of women squatting in the shade and men clutching handfuls of papers still warm from the photocopier in the market. Inside, the heat is dimmed only slightly, and all along the pale blue and yellow paint-flecked walls stand those eager to gain an audience, whispering amongst themselves before sidling towards the unofficial gate keepers who guard each office door with Cerberus-like intensity. Poorly taped-up pieces of paper line the walls, advertising new government schemes, consultation dates or announcing imminent public holidays. Within these rambling bureaucratic institutions, the workforce is almost entirely male, making the forays of unaccompanied women from this village even more remarkable.

There is one notable exception to this male dominance which is the figure of the *onchol pradhan*. After a recent legislative decision in 2012 made in an attempt to redress political gender imbalance, half of these positions must now be awarded to women. Both the *pradhan* and assistant *pradhan* are elected every five years, in contests widely understood here to be far more conceptually significant and politically violent than those at a state level. As the paper-thin tip of the dense and impenetrable wedge of the Indian state within this locality, it was encounters with these figures that were the most sought after and contested by women in the village.

If this is how the state is in reality instantiated here, how it is imagined is paradoxically both far more intimate and more intimidating. The political and bureaucratic landscape is something that vividly animates all daily lives and conversations in the village. Offerings of the state are appraised, and their implementation applauded or criticised, politicians are celebrated or critiqued and the cut and thrust of scandal, bribery and corruption are expected as opposed to the exceptions. There exists the strange and inherently contradictory combination of a deep and vivid knowledge of the workings of the state

remarkable for people in such circumstances matched with a troubling and frustrating lack of understanding (Gupta 1995; Fuller & Benei: 2001).

Amongst the men in the crowded tea shops along the roadside, or the women around the cool grey-green ponds whilst they washed clothes or vegetables, people would animatedly discuss new government ventures, political scandals or upcoming elections. Though the modern Indian state may have shed its exoticism (Fuller & Harriss 2001), it perhaps retains the otherworldliness attributable to Mughal and colonial legacies (Bear 2007a; Street 2014), for my collaborators and others in similarly precarious contexts (Anjaria 2011; 2016) it is arguably more significant than ever.

The colourful ways in which the state and bureaucracy are spoken about invoke deeply familiar forms of language. There is the ubiquitous use of kinship terms, where those to be beseeched for assistance are always *dada* (big brother), *mesho* (uncle) or *bhai* (brother), as has been documented elsewhere (Bear & Mathur 2015; Gupta 1995). West Bengal's Chief Minister is herself a self-proclaimed *didi*, or elder sister, a term used favourably by women like Tabina and Aliya when they describe what they consider to be the advancements made for women under her government.

Given the closeness and intimacy inherent in such familial terms, there is perhaps an understandable revulsion when these terms of kinship are deployed disingenuously towards the women by political and bureaucratic actors, as they frequently are by party members around elections. As we sat on her veranda one day and she flicked plump, green beans from their furry, purple-hued husks, Tabina had screwed up her face in disgust when describing the way party members would feign familial closeness and connection, when they had no intention of following through with their promises: "They have all come here! All of the parties. RSP, CPIM, TMC, Congress... They sit here and they say "Oh didi, I'm your sister, I'm your friend..." but I know it will make no difference".

The second genre of language in which imaginations of the state and its actors are always spoken is similarly deeply familiar. It is that of these women's constant preoccupation, most time-consuming of tasks spent squatting over piles of vegetables and smoking cooking fires, and favourite discussion topic: food and eating. Links between the languages of food and politics extend globally (Bayart 2009), manifesting as corpulent politicians, cake eating 'people', and those who on arriving in power proclaim it their turn to eat (Wrong 2009). A nation-wide passion for food and eating bordering on the obsessive has been well chronicled in India (Grodzins Gold 2014; Janeja 2010; Kuroda forthcoming) though if possible, Bengali culture extends and exacerbates this in its nuanced and strictly adhered to prescriptions (Ecks 2003; Janeja 2010). It is thus not surprising here that such language is used to describe politics and bureaucracy, as has been documented as characteristic of the Hindi-speaking part of the country (Mathur 2017).

In the village, the metaphors and descriptions of food and eating were most fervently deployed when discussing the range of practices<sup>27</sup> considered to be corruption here. “ghush khay, ghush khabe, ghush kheyechhe” [They eat bribes, they will eat bribes, they have eaten bribes]: bribes were always eaten. People would become heavy, or fat, with bribes. Bribes would sit or stay *hater modhe* or ‘in the hand’, like a hard wrought out delicacy waiting to be consumed. Significant speculation took place over how much people ate and how greedy they were (Mathur 2017), with those who had eaten a significant amount still, nonetheless, hungry for more.

Yet often criticisms of greedy bureaucrats were complemented by the simultaneous acknowledgement that though not acceptable, this behaviour is entirely to be expected (Gupta 1995). Further, though there undoubtedly existed amongst most in Tarakhali the sense of jealousy and bitterness at their lack of a seat at the heavily laden political table, as will be illustrated, they too would nonetheless ‘eat’ hungrily should the rare opportunity present itself. It was in this way that Nimra, Sara’s sister-in-law, had both eaten from and fed the people of the village in her tenure as *onchol pradhan* many years ago. “The RSP came to me!” she says proudly, after the stagnation of fifteen years in power prompted a search by the party for fresh and appealing new candidates. With a father widely known and respected for his work with the Congress Party, and given her own height, physical stature and fair skin, she describes herself as having both the pedigree and looking the part. Facing off successfully against her cousin in her first contest (“I beat him resoundingly”, she chuckles) Nimra spent her time navigating complicated situations, eating bribes, offering support to those who depended on her and trying to distance herself from the grime of local office.

She recalls the ubiquitous control of the *pradhan* over the *thana*, or police station, the bribes generated by which helped to boost her meagre R1000 monthly government salary. Individuals would pay her bribes in order to bring police cases against others, or to have their own criminal investigations dropped. A portion of this and the instructions on what to do would then be shared by her with the local police, though in practice she left the actual exchanges, that *nungra byabsha* (dirty business), to her husband. The ‘skimming’ of government funds is recounted with similar frankness, a well-known process (Mathur 2017) in which the official amount allocated for a developmental intervention or initiative is cut by politicians, bureaucrats and private contractors through a process of intimidation, force, or perhaps most commonly, obfuscation, without the recipients even knowing. Nimra calmly described how receipts would be falsified for work not carried out, how subsidised food

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<sup>27</sup> In Tarakhali these included most prominently asking for bribes to provide or amend official documentation, skimming money off the top of government welfare schemes or initiatives, requesting bribes to pursue legal or criminal action, asking for bribes for inclusion in development or infrastructure projects and vote buying.



stuffs would be provided in half the authorised amounts and how bribes would be required for access to all government schemes. Such practices if anything preponderate today.

Yet she too was required to nourish her supporters with both time and money. “The work was hard. Always having to be there to support the people who have voted for you” she says, in particular recalling the nightly visits from bickering siblings, distraught parents, jobless and desperate men, ostracised children or most frequently she says, abandoned and beaten women, which it would be her responsibility to comfort, advise and reprimand. Further, every election was a struggle, at least one *lakh*<sup>28</sup> would be needed from the party coffers in order to pay not for the campaign, but the ‘fees’ of the voters in the village. She would have to buy people *tiffin* (snack), *paan*, *cha* or in more demanding cases, new saris for women, books for their children, or simply offer hot handfuls of crumpled one-hundred-rupee notes paid in cash. “It’s exhausting” she said with a sigh, “manoush khay, khay, khay” [people eat, eat, eat].

Nimra’s experiences and recollections of her tenure as *onchol pradhan* draw to the forefront several key aspects of politics and bureaucracy as practised and imagined here. The languages used are deeply familiar, there exists a banality with respect to the endemic corruption taking place and perhaps most crucially, there is an inherent nature of exchange between individuals and the state here which makes these actions and processes far from one-sided. Yet through the dual prisms of documents and elections, the state takes on a far more intimidating and less everyday form.

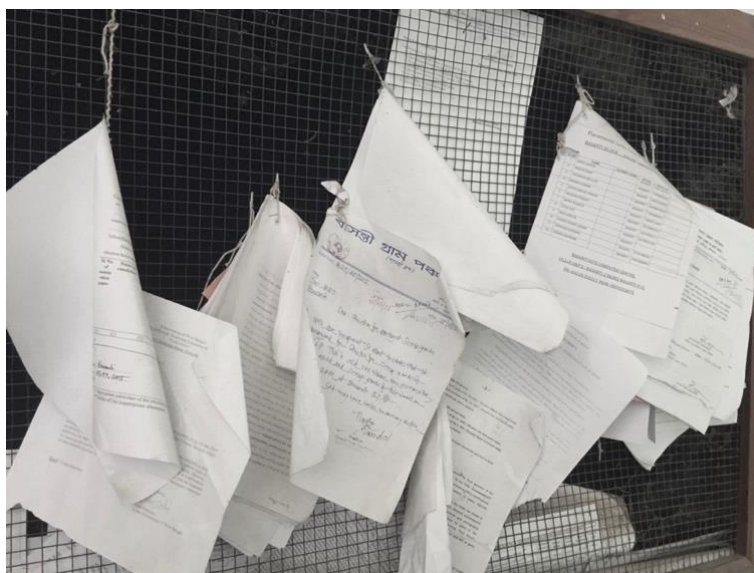


Figure 16: Documents and notices on display in the [REDACTED] *onchol* office

### *Documents and Elections*

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<sup>28</sup> One hundred thousand rupees.

Citizenship is a bundle of papers here as much as it is a bundle of rights. As with all those I know, Tabina kept her markers of official citizenship tightly guarded. Wrapped in paper-thin plastic bags inside a worn black canvas satchel, most of the time they remained shut away for safe keeping in the back of a locked cupboard. One morning she laid them out for me across the cot in the darkened interior room, removing a further taupe canvas wallet from papery, plastic sheaths, inside of which were her family's *adhaar* cards. Other documents were similarly unfolded and unfurled with care and precision: voter ID, BPL card, ration card, health insurance card...though the same could not be said for the spelling of her name [Tobeenah, Torbina, Tabeena] which was different on every item, a fact that due to her illiteracy and the prevalent bureaucratic lackadaisicalness, had seemingly passed unnoticed.

The frequent misspelling of names was just one way in which “the gap between documents and their referents” (Gupta 2013: 436) was made apparent here. Ages were similarly flexible, particularly for older female collaborators such as Tabina's mother-in-law Maryam who had been asked to choose her own birthday when she was first registered with a voter ID card several decades before. Women identified themselves as the most affected by these errors, as often the repeated and prioritised need for father and husband's names on official documents meant that theirs were, perversely, regularly overlooked. Over time, it became clear that one of the early reasons women had for visiting local government offices was in order to correct mistakes in the names and dates of identity cards, with bribes always required in order to obtain the necessary outcomes.

Documents were thus here never something entirely fixed or stable. They possessed an undetermined, shifting and affective quality whereby choice and agency were able to affect subtle alterations in official markers, albeit at a price (Kelly 2006; Tuckett 2015). Though they were regarded with the reverence for antiquated forms of documentation found in post-colonial bureaucracies across South Asia (Bear 2007a; Hull 2012; Mathur 2012; 2016) and more widely (Street 2014) they nonetheless lacked the rigidity or precision that may be associated with Western bureaucratic regimes.

Even the most formative and finite of documents, those of birth and death certificates, had the ability to shift and change. Over time I learnt that the largest number of bribes paid by women across the village was in order to correct mistaken details on the birth certificates of their children, (Muslim) names which had typically been entered incorrectly by (Hindu) bureaucratic gate keepers with the women themselves often illiterate and thus unable to check. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Khozana learnt with great distress whilst her husband was dying that in order to obtain an Indian Railways state widow's pension, she would need to provide the local government with images of his dead body and funeral, a process she hesitantly and with distress agreed to, defying religious and social conventions.

These kinds of incursions that such official documents can make on individual lives and corporality leads Street to identify them as “a technology for surveillance of, and intervention in, the individual body” (Street 2012: 11). For her collaborators in a Papuan New Guinea hospital, their clinic books that both facilitated present access and indexed past medical histories thus served as sites in which their physical bodies became visible to the state. For Khozana, she was similarly required to make the physical body of her dead husband present and officially visible, through photographic evidence that starkly contravened her moral and religious sensibilities.

There nonetheless exists a notable contextual divergence between Street’s collaborators and women here such as Kaki. Amongst those in Papua New Guinea with whom she worked, Street notes the significant value placed upon such official documents that belied the conceptual distance between these individuals and state itself. There existed amongst her informants “little sense of national identity (Street 2012: 12) and the state was conceived of most strongly as “an absent presence” (Street 2012: 12), rendering their valorization of their hospital clinic books quite surprising. This is in stark contrast to how people in Tarakhali conceived of national identity, clinging fervently to it, and seeking to engage in different political practices such as voting in which they embodied and enacted it (Banerjee 2014). Thus for the women I knew, the obsession with forms of documentation when complemented by their attitudes to Indian identity was arguably even more significant.

The documents that by definition could not be possessed generated perhaps the deepest upset and anxiety amongst women here. These would be ‘lists’ classing people as below or above the poverty line, putting them forward for the government bathroom scheme, or identifying their household as one in need of additional food security measures.

The eligibility criteria for support were similarly opaque though much scrutinised. The hair-thin division between those classed as Below the Poverty Line (BPL) and those Above the Poverty Line (APL) is an intensely contested split with highly significant and immediately felt consequences. BPL status ensures access to a variety of food subsidies, as well as discounted gas and cooking oil, but extends as far as remuneration for trips to hospitals in order to give birth, and preferential selection for the diversity of other schemes in existence such as food security. For those tightrope-walking this threshold, the clumsiness of this distinction in this instance is not only despised but is a bureaucratic boundary that is continuously contested<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> The introduction of the *adhaar* card universal identity number scheme across India has been intended to eliminate the messy, inefficient and easily corruptible multifarious welfare programmes that are at the moment in existence. Currently in West Bengal, 89% of the population are quoted by the State Government as signed up to the scheme, though a significant portion of those I knew in Tarakhali were yet to have been registered.

Sitting in one of the two rooms in her earth-built home, Tabina had anxiously described her attempts to have all of her family members recognised as BPL, as opposed to just her husband, a shift that would dramatically increase their weekly subsidies and overall household non-monetised income. Looking around the cramped room, it was nonetheless notable that she owned a large mirror and glass fronted cupboard stuffed full of china crockery rarely ever seen here, and a new television set. Outside stood a gleaming motorcycle that she told me was used by her sons.

When the government inspectors came to Tarakhali to conduct the most recent survey testing poverty levels, their arrival was unannounced. This is in keeping with what bureaucratic insiders tell me is a new strategy to prevent people from manipulating their circumstances in order to obtain more assistance from the state. That said, Tabina revealed with a knowing smile that she was forewarned by a neighbour, the information moving across the inevitably porous boundaries that separate those living in this village. Acting quickly, she was able to pass the large television set out of the window to her sister-in-law Aksha to hide in her house temporarily, whilst snarling at her son to roll the motorcycle into a nearby patch of jungle where it could remain concealed until the inspection was over.

Tabina's cunning attempts to manipulate the way in which she is seen by the local government inspectors draws into focus both the transience and the arbitrariness of such encounters between those dwelling in precarity and the state. It is reminiscent of similar strategies of Han's collaborators in Santiago, who also recognised that they needed to "be seen" (Han 2012: 55-56) as extremely poor by government officials conducting house visits, in order to obtain certain kinds of state provisions and benefits. When discussing the relationship between her dishevelled appearance and the municipal subsidy she might be entitled to, Senora Ana thus said, "if you walk around dirty, make the house dirty – if you look poor, like animal, then they lower your points" (Han 2012:55-56).

What such moments highlight is that what can be extremely fleeting interactions nonetheless have the brutal potential to become "concrete encounters" (Han 2012: 69) in which individuals become fixed in the eyes of the state. Enmeshed in a freeze frame, there exists a radical "temporal disjuncture" (Han 2012: 63) between the singular moments of state encounter for the individual and the continually fluctuating and shifting nature of their lives lived in poverty, that results in biographies and histories, at least in official terms and records, becoming erased (Han 2012). It is in this way that documents offer such a "unique space of engagement" (Street 2012: 12) with state representatives, as something both desired and sought after but also unwanted and heavily critiqued (Navaro-Yashin 2007). Lending a craved official acknowledgement and unusual formality to everyday lives, they work to both recognise, and render invisible, people and their experiences simultaneously (Han 2012). For the

women in this village there is an even more significant fear than the paralysing representation one may be subjected to by official markers of documentation: being undocumented.

Alima made herself comfortable on the floor under Kaki's low-hanging, juddering fan. We had met only once or twice before, a few months ago when she made the arduous and expensive journey from Delhi to attend her mother *nani* Ashima's funeral. Divorced at a young age, with only one son, she left Tarakhali more than 10 years ago to try to secure a future for herself and her child in the country's capital, a place she loathes but acknowledges 'has everything'. Gradually, she has scraped together the money to buy a plot of land in the village where she hopes to one day build a house, though that is not why she is here. She has come to vote.

It had taken her around a day and half to reach the village, travelling in packed trains trundling slowly across the breadth of the country in the steaming April heat. Could she not have voted in Delhi? "You have to vote!" she replied emphatically, "If you don't vote problems will happen". The conversation that follows reflects the elsewhere noted complexity surrounding elections and voting practices in India (Banerjee 2014). In West Bengal, where politics are notoriously turbulent and violent, the act of voting reveals itself to be deeply entangled in ideas of obligation, strategy, corruption, place and identity. This is far removed from the uncomplicated exercise of a democratic right.

Alima, like many other internal labour migrants across India, always returns to her village to vote. There is the frequent sense amongst those I talk to that votes are somehow intertwined with one's *jonmostan*, for these Muslim villagers, a weighty and emotive concept. The political fate of the land around us, rich with histories and stories either personal or drawn from the shared, communal religious inflected imagination, is one that matters to them. It lends a permanency and security to lives otherwise characterised by marginality. Thus the long expensive journeys, the fights with husband's families over leaving adopted dwelling places, are not only desirable, but necessary. "I don't care", Alima says, of the elections in Delhi, "Here is what matters".

In practice, the act of voting is crucial to the precarious relationship people in Tarakhali maintain with the state and local bureaucracy. There exists the pervasive fear that failure to vote for a couple of years in a row will result in their name being struck off the electoral register, and consequently one's voter ID card being rendered invalid. As the primary identity document across India, voter ID is required not only to access any form of government provision or assistance but is also indexed to every other form of identity document, as well as being necessary in order for one's children to obtain these things in the first instance. Loss of this official status could be catastrophic.

Thus, accompanying the aforementioned almost spiritual aspect, there is a tangible fear that motivates voting, one of statelessness, placeless-ness or lack of official, recognised identity. Growing increasingly agitated by my inability to grasp the seriousness of the matter, Alima said “If you don’t vote, you’re not a person. You’re not a person of this *onchol*, not a person of this village, maybe not even a person of this country. People might think that you’re a Bangladeshi who’s just turned up!”.

A similar conjunction between the exercise of voting in elections and one’s status as “a living sentient being” (Banerjee 2014: 160) in underscored by Banerjee in *Why India Votes?*. For groups across India, the significance of voting as a practice intended to assert citizenship is emphasised as one of many diverse reasons that might motivate such behaviours (Banerjee 2014: 160-162). Yet there is a subtle though crucial difference between such representations and the articulations of women in Tarakhali such as Alima. Whilst those in Banerjee’s ethnography speak of voting as a positive and assertive “life affirming” (Banerjee 2014: 160) action, often entwining this participation in democracy with a universal rights discourse, here it is represented more often as a defensive and protective one against state violence and national exclusion.

In May 2016, a characteristically Indian electoral frenzy swept across the state. Newspapers and television channels fixated on the flamboyant characters, the bitter contests and the accompanying scandals. In West Bengal, *Didi*’s firm grip on power looked only set to tighten, despite the various bribery and corruption exposés that threatened to embroil various highflying members of her TMC party. In the dark, stifling tea shop on the roadside where the men of the village whiled away the morning heat, there was lively discussion about the events, though also consensus that they were likely to be untrue, most significantly as the amounts of money suggested as bribes were viewed as far too small to have been asked for.

In Tarakhali the mood was of subdued anticipation and Tabina found the whole spectacle deeply enjoyable. As we sat one afternoon on the steps of her house, seeking patches of shade in the formidable throb of the April afternoon sun, we talked about politics whilst she oiled and combed the knots out of her long, greying hair, still wet after her midday bath in the pond. “What is the government like? Why do you ask? Before, after, the government is the same - *kichu dai ni, kichu dai ni!* [they give us absolutely nothing]. Whoever wins, it doesn’t matter, not to me, (gesturing to her house behind us) it won’t matter for us. The party that wins, they will give everything to their people, family, friends, and those others - *jara kache kache thakche, kache kache boshey, bhabchi hoyto olpo nebo*” [those who stay close by, sit there close by, thinking maybe I’ll be able to take a little].

Perhaps more disconcertingly, she pointed out that whilst elections happened often here the actors involved would nonetheless remain the same. Powerful local figures held fluid political identities,

swapping allegiances and switching parties depending on who was most likely to be in power. Besides, Tabina had said slyly, people here will always lie about who they voted for, claiming that it was for the party that won, this only minutes after she had told me she had voted for the incumbent TMC party in the last election.

“Of course I’ll vote, everyone votes. But I’ll spoil the ballot....Ha! No, everyone in this house votes. My husband will tell us who we should all vote for. The night before the election happens, he will sit us all down in that room (a gesture over her right shoulder) and tell us who we need to cast out votes for. We’ll all nod and agree, but when he leaves I tell my sons and *bou-mas* [daughters-in-law] “Vote for whoever you want!”. They’ll listen to me, and I’ll vote TMC, we all will except my husband. He has many friends who are friends with some Congress people, so everyone assumes our family are Congress, another reason we get nothing. I don’t like those Congress people, they are always causing problems, starting fights around the election... kintu....TMC manoush amake janen, janen hoyto kichu oshanti hobe, ekhane thakte parben” [But...TMC party people know me, and they know that if there should be any unrest on election day that they can come here until it blows over].

Within households, the attempts of the patriarch to instruct everyone on how they should cast their votes has been something noted as occurring across India (Banerjee 2014). So prominent was this expectation of instruction on voting practices, that in certain cases women would ask this question “even of the visiting researcher” (Banerjee 2014: 147). Tabina, perhaps predictably, defies any such gendered prescriptions, by not only voting for who she wants but issuing counter instructions advising the other members of her household to do the same. What her comments above illustrate further is the deeply emotional language used to discuss such interactions, the inherently contradictory disdain for a corrupted and ungiving state, matched by her own willingness to open up her home to political actors during potential electoral violence, and the significant depth and nuanced form of political knowledge that women here like Tabina possess.

Documents and elections have been explored as two ways in which women from this village work to make themselves visible to the state through technologies and practices of recognition. These are moments of encounter that are themselves fleeting, though contain within them the potentialities of permanent inclusion and exclusion. There is thus an urgency and necessity to them that, as will be explored in the next section, has opened up the need for the physical spaces of local bureaucracy to become those where women here, not men, seek to become seen by the Indian state.

*shorkari kaj: Prejudice, Outside Spaces and Bureaucratic Time*

In beginning to explore the everyday sites of encounter between women and the state in Tarakhali in all their potential and possibility (Anjaria 2011; Street 2012; 2014) I will start far away from Tarakhali, in the Foreign Regional Registration Offices in Kolkata where I endured my own bureaucratic entanglements.

In my quest to register as a foreign researcher in the state, I went back and forth to this building at least ten times, at each instance after a substantial wait being monotonely instructed by a different greying, elderly bureaucrat behind a shabby desk to return with a different letter, a new photograph, an alternative photocopy, in spite of these things having never been mentioned on any previous occasion. Finally, having already incurred a fine for failing to successfully register within the stipulated month of arrival and in mounting desperation, I brought along my ageing Bengali *mesbo* with whom I was staying, whose dapper walking stick and clear *bhodorok* pedigree finally enabled me to obtain my permit.

Over my dozen or so visits, I became aware of a constant in the waiting room. A group of three or four visibly Muslim men (long *kurtas*, *tupi* hats, flowing beards) sitting quietly awaiting their turn to be called forward to the three or four desks found at the front, where the arbitrators of bureaucracy sat. But they were never called. In all the hours I spent in the waiting room they were never even acknowledged by those in charge, seemingly arriving each day and waiting patiently to be summoned only to be required to return once again the following morning. Several times I offered my own appointment to them, an offer always met with a polite smile and a slight incline of the head towards the desks, suggesting I go forward.

This visceral example is not intended to implant my own bureaucratic experiences unnecessarily into this text, rather to underscore my own personal encounters and observation of the stigmatisation that Muslim men can face currently in ostensibly neutral bureaucratic spaces across India. Since the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, aided and cajoled by a BJP government that seeks to promote the idea of India as in essence a Hindu nation, the country's Muslim population, but most specifically the men, have enjoyed a problematic presence in outside spaces.

The rise in Islamophobia in recent decades across the country has been well documented. It manifests itself in the destruction of Muslim spaces of worship in violent reclamations of public space (Heitmeyer 2009; Van Der Veer 1994) and in explosions of horrific, communal violence (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Sarkar 2002). For those experiencing them, the times of violence are not neatly distinguishable from times of calm and thus punctuate the present with underlying fear and anxiety (Brass 1997; Das 2007; Heitmeyer 2009). Such concerns are amplified by retaliatory attacks after incidents of Islamic terrorism (Blom-Hansen 2001) and more subtly through the mechanisms of city planning and state provision (Gayer & Jaffrelot 2012; SCR 2006).



This climate is one of particular bureaucratic harshness for Muslim men. Though Muslim women and their bodies may become sites of sexual violence on which religion and nationalism are brutally inscribed (Sarkar 2002), Muslim men have become seen as sexual predators committing acts of *love jihad*<sup>30</sup>, anti-nationalists who slaughter and consume an animal considered to be holy and *jonghi* [terrorists] with links to the Muslim majority nations either side of India's borders.

Such stigmatisation is of particular prevalence when Islamic faith intersects with economic precarity, and those in question are thus the "labouring poor" (Bear 2015: 116). In Bear's book *Navigating Austerity* exploring debt and bureaucracy on the Hooghly river in Kolkata, we see the behaviour of low-level bureaucrat Vikas, who's paternalistic approach and jocular camaraderie with those seeking his support dissolves when he encounters Muslim *majhis* in similar circumstances. This is embodied by him through a switch to a form of "domineering, aggressive Hindi" (Bear 2015: 116), itself associated with the issuing of commands to subordinates, and the adoption of a disinterested and unhelpful demeanour. Others have noted how Muslim men are deploying strategies of education in order to transcend such bureaucratic exclusion (Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffery 2008). Some Muslim communities within India have instead forged links with global Islamic reformist organisations or sought out work and accommodation within other, Islamic bureaucratic regimes (Osella & Osella 2009).

Muslim men in the village of Tarakhali were not exempt from such hostilities in public spaces, nor unaware of the challenges that their religious identity might create for them. Those rare few men with government jobs in the village cultivated specifically neutral physical characteristics. Sara's husband, a high-ranking police officer, eschewed a beard in favour of a large moustache, and was never seen in anything other than a shirt and a pair of crisp trousers. Munira's son, a young man who worked in the BDO office in Sonarkhali was clean shaven, wore the smart shirt and jeans ubiquitous of young, aspirational Indian males as opposed to Islamic dress, and on the occasion that I interviewed him, was explicitly critical of 'Muslims' and their practices.

Schooling has become another site in which early interventions were understood as offsetting such potential future discriminations. There existed a far stronger desire amongst those in Tarakhali for their sons to learn English as opposed to Arabic, Urdu or any other forms of Islamic education, on the basis of it being recognised as a significantly more useful skill in navigating public spaces and work opportunities going forwards. Even the imam of the *boro masjid* sent all of his children to a Christian

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<sup>30</sup> This was a popularly used term in claims that Muslim men were targeting Hindu women in order to marry them, convert them to Islam and consequently increase the Indian Muslim population.

school in [REDACTED] because, as he explained, they provided the best education and the paths available for those pursuing strictly Islamic scholarship were dwindling. For others, their religious identity had already become problematic and rendered public spaces unsafe. Many of those who did *raj-mistri kaj* as day labourers complained of the challenges in being picked for jobs that were typically overseen by Hindu contractors. Aliya's son had been chased before having his head split open by a group of RSS youths, for no reason other than being a Muslim.

Muslim men are thus at this present moment hyper-visible in public spaces, though in a stigmatising, brutal and unwanted way. Unable to effectively challenge such representations, instead attempting to shape their images so as not to arouse suspicion, there nonetheless remains for those in this community a clear need to engage with the Indian state and bureaucracy. This is one factor I identify as opening up these "ordinary spaces of negotiation" (Anjaria 2011: 58) to the women of this village. A second possible reason that women have been able to become those bureaucratic gatekeepers of this community, one that specifically places this chapter in conversation with the previous one, is the nature of such bureaucratic spaces themselves. As was explored extensively in the preceding chapter, women in Tarakhali are only in very rare circumstances permitted to perform any kind of outside work. How then are they able to undertake this externally located *shorkari kaj*, occurring in often male dominated spaces far from the confines of the village?

The first thing to note is that although outside of the village itself, these are nonetheless actually *inside* spaces. Though requiring a journey by crowded auto-rickshaw or on the back of a clapped-out van, once there these women were nonetheless once again encompassed within the walls of bureaucratic buildings, as opposed to outside in public spaces, where they might be seen as embodying impropriety. This seemed to neutralise the cultural and religious prohibitions that serve to discourage female forays into outside spaces here, such as Aksha's highly criticised daily trips to the [REDACTED] bazaar.

Street notes the construction of these kinds of colonial bureaucratic buildings as intended to serve the needs of the arbitrators of bureaucracy as opposed to those of the surrounding populations (2014). She identifies them in her context as thus spatially "designed primarily to protect the white colonial enclave from the untamed, racialized tropics outside rather than train a disciplinary gaze on the bodies within" (Street 2014: 40-41). Within these buildings near Tarakhali, I would suggest that a similar intention when constructing these offices has served to create spaces that now may work effectively for women as barriers to the male gaze.

There is a further aspect of these spaces that I suggest has rendered them acceptable for women to spend time in, which is the nature of work that they undertake when they are there. This is explicitly

considered necessary work: “shorkari kaj lage!” [government work is needed] women would say when describing these encounters. As needed work, this sets it apart from other kinds of externally located labour that though capable of boosting household income or advancing female aspirations are, nonetheless, not necessary in the same way. Such *shorkari kaj* thus doesn’t explicitly challenge gender dynamics or religious ideas given the ability to deflect any questions or enquires as to why it is being done by women on the basis that it is something “necessary”.

In keeping with this idea of *shorkari kaj* as needed work, there is finally a third temporal aspect of these spaces that I suggest has enabled them to become sites of female encounter and interaction. Bureaucratic time as experienced by women here was far from a time of “waiting” (Street 2014: 141). Instead, contra-Street and others (Auyero 2012; Street 2014), bureaucratic offices and local police stations here were experienced by women as dynamic places of labour and interaction, as opposed to those of waiting for the state.

Street draws an explicit contrast between the “sense of movement, both physical and social, that characterized life in the village with the permanent stasis of the hospital ward” (Street 2014: 120), something her collaborators struggled to come to terms with during their stay in hospital. For those waiting anxiously for medical diagnoses, there was thus a palpable sense of frustrating inertia, complemented by the fear of what those in the village would be, increasingly unhappily, making of their lack of contribution to its dynamic and productive life world, something they were in some cases required to apologetically offset through the presentation of gifts (Street 2014).

There existed an inverse temporal disjuncture between time in the village for women, which they described as monotonous and unchanging, with that of their unpredictable though potentiality imbued interactions when undertaking *shorkari kaj*. These activities possessed for them a dynamism and an excitement, rendering these bureaucratic spaces sites of “hope, and experimentation” (Street 2014: 141). In this way, these moments also represent for these women opportunities to construct what Pedersen and Nielsen have described as trans-temporal hinges, moments “that connect(s) the multiple temporalities” (Pedersen and Nielsen 2013: 25) of experience, collapsing pasts and futures into single moments, prompting reflections on what has happened before and predictions or speculations on what will happen in the future. Through the collision of their own monotonous temporal experiences, with the rapturous moments of state engagement and the external bureaucratic logics at work, these encounters offered up the ability for women to witness representations of “several kinds of social and nonhuman time at once” (Bear 2016: 8).

As was noted in the discussion of documents, there exists a “temporal disjuncture” (Han 2012: 63) between these fleeting instances and their long-term implications for those struggling to be seen,

which arguably here provides only a further gravitas and permanency to these women's expeditions. If these are the conditions that have facilitated women becoming those who make themselves visible to the state, I will conclude with exploring how they make themselves seen as they want to be seen.

*"Being seen"*

Tabina asked on many occasions whether I was stupid, unaware that the seemingly ever-present wad of tobacco and *paan* nestled in the interior of her cheek made her rapid and huskily delivered Bengali almost impossible for me to decipher. One day, somehow both louche and regal, she reclined on the cot bed in a bright pink sari, fanning herself in the rising heat as we talked about her various documents and bureaucratic wrangling. Though mostly relaxed and at ease, she at times sat up, gestured violently and jumped off of the cot to pace around the small, crowded mud-built room, displaying the steel and spark that underscores her capacity and willingness to engage so readily and forcefully with state bureaucracy.

She was particularly disgruntled about the recent loss of her Voter ID card, an error that had required significant financial and temporal investment to put right. As soon as she realised it was missing, she had undertaken a frantic struggle for a replacement. This involved eight trips to the SDO offices in Canning, a bumpy, winding and inconceivably overcrowded shared auto ride away of around an hour in each direction. She estimated after a pause that the whole process had cost her about R1700 in bribes. This figure was one I had heard on four separate occasions from different individuals in Tarakhali and thus seemed to have been decided upon as "what the current figure was" (Gupta 1995: 381) in order to replace such an important document. The magnitude of this sum is underscored by the fact that a simple replacement should have been just 25 rupees.

Though in pursuit of a state-issued document, Tabina's money was mainly paid to the group of self-appointed gate-keepers who both literally and metaphorically guarded the door of the relevant government official. She had obligingly bought them tea, cigarettes, *paan*, biscuits, without which the door would not have even been opened to her. Finally, after several unsuccessful visits, she gained an audience with the relevant official. Once inside, there were further bribes to pay in order to 'get the work done' as she and so many others put it, costs she mutely accepted. After weeks of fruitless journeys and unfulfilled expenditure, she finally received a replacement.

On this last day, she told me smilingly, once the card was safely tucked into her sari and she was walking out of the office, she paused in the doorway. She had then turned around and given everyone a mouthful, demanding to know why they had been so greedy and had eaten so many of her offerings. As the bureaucrat began to say something in Hindi to one of the assembled company, she had jumped

in “ami Hindi basha jani! ami sob buhjte pari!” [I know Hindi! I can understand everything!]. Laughing, she said she had shouted so loudly that they would not be quick to forget her. Having witnessed one of these outbursts on another occasion, I am inclined to agree.

It may be tempting to frame Tabina’s narrative as one of structural state violence (Gupta 2012), in which the most disenfranchised are further exploited due to the petty wrangling of low-level Indian bureaucratic corruption (Gupta 1995). However, such a characterisation fundamentally overlooks how women like her experience and articulate these encounters themselves. For them, these interactions are valuable opportunities to become “seen” by the state, to utilise their skills in negotiation to gain access and to obtain the outcomes they desire, which as impoverished, uneducated Muslim women, are rare moments of such publicly demonstrable achievement.

Further, in this encounter as in others, Tabina manipulated the way she was seen at different points of her bureaucratic journey. At first, she was meekly subservient, willingly offering bribes and small tokens, yet once she had achieved her desired ends, she adopted her characteristic fiery and aggressive persona, reprimanding state officials and their hangers-on for being so greedy and requiring so much money to get the work done. On other occasions, she has passed her television set out of the window to ensure that she seems ‘poor’ enough for government food support (Han 2012) or has become *kache-kache* [close or intimate with] with the *onchol pradhan* through flattery and obsequiousness, in order to gain access to one of her female-focused microfinance schemes.

In contrast to those with whom Street worked (2014), I suggest that within these interactions with the state, women are seeking to ‘be seen’ in many different guises. There is a performative element to their foregrounding of their diverse qualities at different moments, and a tactical elision of their circumstances in order to obtain the most satisfying and rewarding outcome. Thus, it appears not simply straightforward recognition by the state that these women are seeking (Street 2014), but rather the chance to manipulate and control the ways in which the state sees them at different tactical junctures.

The allure of the possibilities entailed by becoming visible to the state was evident in the way in which women discussed these encounters. Their passion for talking about them was so striking, that when formulating the template for the extended structured interviews I would carry out with women towards the end of my fieldwork, I began by asking them about their experiences of visiting local government offices and meeting officials in order to open up a comfortable and relaxed dialogue that could lead to more intimate and uneasy conversation topics. The descriptions and stories of these women’s bureaucratic interactions were rich with aspects of themselves that were otherwise tightly

hidden. In them they could shout, curse, bribe, sweet-talk, threaten to stand on people's chests and use their charm to obtain what they wanted.

The rewards of their labour were proudly displayed. Each time I visited her Tabina would grandly gesture to her newly constructed bathroom, yet again informing me that, though it was her father's name which been on the government's list for the bathroom scheme, she had managed to convince them that he lived here with her (he didn't) thus ensuring its construction alongside her home. "bathroom lagbe?!" [Do you need the bathroom?!] she would ask me excitedly, only to be visibly disappointed when I once more politely declined. Her sister-in-law Aksha would similarly boast of her array of bureaucratic contacts. In particular, she was pleased to have recently cultivated a good relationship with the local police chief after phoning in an accident when she had seen one on the roadside returning from the bazaar, and offering to provide evidence of what she had seen. She had now begun making occasional trips to the local *thana*, to try and bribe him to settle a case on another relative's behalf.

Not only do these encounters provide women with the chance to be seen, they also represent an opportunity to be seen as *women*. This was something that was rarely able to be cultivated during the quotidian cycle of taxing physical labour within their homes, remaining for the most part within the confines of the village. Clothing and appearance for women here are typically perfunctory, the only requirements being that they permit their bodies to undertake the kinds of exhausting physical labour they are required to perform and conform sufficiently with prescriptions of religious modesty.

On their bureaucratic expeditions however, this shifts. I watched one day as Kaki readied herself for a trip to the *onchol* office in town. She bathed early, taking time to soap and comb out her hair in the pond, disregarding the morning's cooking chores. She selected one of her better saris from the large chest in her room that contained her most prized possessions, a *Quran* wrapped in plastic bags and a cheap, nylon fleece that I had given her on the day of her son Mubarak's wedding. A worn canvas bag was selected, and a *teep* [bindi] and some kohl applied where younger women may have added more make up or selected some costume jewellery. Carrying a tatty parasol to ward off the sun to which she was normally indifferent, she picked her way down the path, nimbly avoiding the *kada* [mud] she had tramped through only hours earlier.

Catching sight of these women waiting on the roadside, or wafting past the tea shops, the responses to enquiries about where they were going would be shouted with a lightness: "*onchol* jachi! thana songe kotha bolbo! SDO dekhbo!" [I'm going to the *onchol* office! I'll speak with someone at the police station! I'm going to see the SDO!].

On the scorching day of the May 2016 election, I watched as Sara swayed down the road in the shimmering heat, in a bright, teal coloured crepe sari, with accompanying costume jewellery, dark lipstick, sunglasses and her dashing police officer husband, the perfect accessory on her arm. This was simply to cast her vote, a process that must have taken no more than fifteen minutes, but she waited regally in line, voted, chatted to an election official outside, before processing back up the road home. As has been noted elsewhere, the “momentary glimpse of feeling valued was hugely significant” (Banerjee 2014: 167-168) to such encounters women had here with the state and offered enjoyable and rare opportunities to celebrate and foreground their femininity. Occasions such as the above were relished as few and far between.

There exists here a lack of daily femininity that can be juxtaposed with bureaucratic encounters in which these women not only display themselves physically as women but utilise their gender to gently negotiate a desired outcome. Whilst flirtatious would be too strong a word to describe the soft touch of a hand on an arm outside a voting booth, or the kindly offering of a hot cup of *cha* or a cigarette to a bureaucratic gatekeeper, there was a deployment of female-ness that helped the women I knew to charm their way into desirable situations.

A further gendered element exists in these encounters, through the way that women were able to interpret the offering of bribes as a necessary part of a mutual exchange with the state, which was not simply a one-sided, exploitative one. Thus what would be striking in so many of my conversations with women, would be the failure of questions around bribe giving to elicit any kinds of positive or affirmative answer, unless they were contextualised within specific circumstances or scenarios. This reflects what others have highlighted (Banerjee 2008) as the failure of direct questioning around politics and bureaucracy to produce straightforward answers.

One morning, Tabina outlined her future bureaucratic ambitions for me. She wanted to gain access to the food security list for her mother-in-law Maryam, who given her run-down dwelling, anxieties over not being fed by the families of her sons and continual need to search for edible fruits and plants in the surrounding jungle, clearly needed it. Tabina had also set her sights on getting her name on the farming support list designed to provide assistance for those who are cultivators, which she and her family are patently not. She began to speak about the possibility of paying someone to help speed up her ‘case’ with respect to the food security bill. This was the same man she had threatened to admonish at the start of this chapter, who acts as an informal broker of sorts, using his sway with local bureaucrats to extort money out of those visiting their offices for small favours.

Later on, during this same conversation, Tabina denied that she had, or would ever pay, a bribe to anyone in a government office. After about five minutes of continual questioning, during which we

both became increasingly frustrated, she said that of course she had however paid people to help her, to put in a good word, or to look on her submissions positively, in fact that this is expected practice in order to “get the work done”. There was no indication that her initial reluctance was due to fear or uncomfortableness, particularly given the open and honest way these things are discussed here, rather it was as though they have happened on a different register, being just the expected practices to “make things happen”.

Mathur has recently highlighted the density of existing definitions of corruption in India (2017), in which multiple practices are folded into one (Ruud 2000). In keeping with this recognition of the need to tease apart such behaviours, Tabina’s comments here illustrate something significant, namely that women here do not consider all such exchanges corrupt per-se, rather identifying some of them as a necessary part of obtaining desired, bureaucratic outcomes.

Women in Tarakhali thus appeared far more able than men to accept the often transactional nature of state interactions. This could in large part be due to their daily practices of mediating tensions (Ring 2006) and navigating violence, where compromise is always an element of any encounter, in contrast to men in the village. This is borne out by recent research in other Muslim communities in West Bengal, in which it has been conversely illustrated that the state is imagined by Muslim men as predatory and morally corrupt (Pool 2016).

In contrast for women here, bribes are themselves given little moral value, independent of context. As small tokens in order to complete exchanges, asked for in order to “get the work done” bribes are accepted, though not necessarily liked. When they become heavily criticised and morally base is when the reciprocity of such exchanges is not recognised by the state, which demands excessive amounts of money or fails to perform the necessary work in exchange. Thus, what is roundly condemned was when such measures were taken to be excessive, exploitative or unnecessary, or in the evocative language used by the women of Tarakhali and others elsewhere in India (Mathur 2017) when someone had become too greedy or too fat.

This acceptance of some exchanges as necessary is matched by the women’s own willingness to consume political or bureaucratic offerings when they became available. Not only was there the desire of women such as Tabina to manipulate their image in the eyes of the state to obtain money or food stuffs that they may not otherwise be entitled to, there was also a readiness to accept offerings in exchange for the promises of certain behaviours.

Recall the willingness of Nimra to ‘feed’ those who would offer their votes to her at a hugely significant cost to her party, as well as her own happy ‘eating’ of their bribes. All the women I knew



in Tarakhali were likewise happy to take the offerings of those in power in order to behave in a certain way, all of them accepting new saris or money in the days leading up to the election in exchange for the promise to cast their votes a certain way for a certain party. Aliya had even gone as far as to cultivate an agreement as a ‘vote capturer’ on behalf of the TMC, whereby she would target those that used her path in order to access the main road and corral them into voting for a specified candidate, in exchange for political protection going forwards.

In this chapter I have sought to explore the ways in which women in Tarakhali seek to ‘be seen’ by the Indian state through participation in local bureaucratic and political processes. I have identified a climate of Muslim male stigmatisation, and the nature of bureaucratic spaces, times and the work itself as factors that have enabled women to adopt this unusual role within their community. Further, I have underscored that not only do women now perform *shorkari kaj* on behalf of themselves and their families, they enjoy this undertaking and the possibilities that it presents. It is a form of labour that they are remarkably skilled at performing and well suited to, possessing both the ability to “compel the state to see them” (Street 2014: 2) as they want to be seen, and the willingness to accept the bilateral, mutually transactional nature of these encounters.

When I asked Tabina why she had waited so long to admonish those responsible for her voter ID card tribulations she said simply “eka eka chilam” [I was there all alone]. This simple statement underscores just how unlike other moments these extra-ordinary bureaucratic encounters are for women leading lives in this village. Free from the dense, locally rooted networks of female support and interaction, bureaucratic encounters represented individual moments of being seen, and of forging new networks and connections in unexpected places, with all their brilliant possibility and inherent vulnerability. After a pause Tabina continued “I know that if I let my mouth run in Canning...there is no one”.



Figure 17: Tarakhali during the monsoon

## Part Four: The Future, Here and Hereafter

### Chapter 7 – “Only Allah Knows”: Death, Dreams and the Afterlife

As with other marginal or minority groups within India (Bear 2007a; Shah 2010), the Muslim women of Tarakhali struggle to clearly envisage a future as part of the Indian Nation. Simultaneously, they are being encouraged by the Tablighi Jama'at to re-orientate themselves to a wider Muslim *ummah*, or community, in which their faith represents a point of commonality as opposed to one of difference.

When articulating their visions for the future, women would often resort to abstractions, such as “chelera amader bobishot!” [Boys are our future!], unable to speak further about how such things would become manifest. The pauses and frustrated expressions of absence when asking questions about the future here are perhaps indicative of the challenge of imagining or aspiring towards more concrete things (Appadurai 2004) when the daily grind of survival in the present and the relentless navigation of everyday *tenshun* becomes all encompassing. Yet through a use of the anthropology of time and the future, I will seek to move beyond Appadurai's absolute assertions regarding the restrictive ties between poverty and aspiration (ibid 2004) showing how women here nonetheless describe and anticipate what comes next.

Vigh has introduced the idea of crisis as context (2008) as a mechanism by which to capture the challenges of imagining the future posed for those existing in situations of perpetual or endemic crisis. Though not in a situation of war or militarised group conflict such as those as he describes in Guinea-Bissau, the women in Tarakhali nonetheless undergo the perpetual mediation of *tenshun*, domestic violence, poverty, religious exclusion and political uncertainty, which are identified as exactly the kinds of other structural factors that can induce such experiences of continuous crisis (Vigh 2008). Occupying this multiplicity of unstable boundary zones, the flow of life can become “so fluid that it is experienced as having lost its course” (Vigh 2008: 17).

Yet an ethnographic focus on the “social imaginary” (Vigh 2008: 20) of those dwelling within such worlds can work to tease apart the complex ways in which people nonetheless explore and imagine the future. I use this term as Vigh defines it, as “the way in which we comprehend the unfolding of our social terrain and our position and possibilities of movement in it” (Vigh 2006: 483). In particular, there may be “no clearer” (Vigh 2008: 20) exemplar of how individuals strive to situate themselves in the world, create and maintain relationships with others, and cultivate understandings of the future, than these women dwelling in such unpredictable timescapes (Han 2012; Harms 2011; 2013; Neilsen 2014).

Therefore though the women of this village may be existing in times of crisis as context (Vigh 2008), they nonetheless spend significant amounts of time imagining and anticipating the future through the social imaginary. However, this is not confined to one that they will experience in this lifetime, but is perhaps most significantly located in the next. Nor are their articulations or commentaries restricted to a single form or context, instead embodying a creative multiplicity indicative of their production through continuous, dynamic struggle, in which by imagining the future women seek to construct diverse forms of agency in the present.

Though implicitly aligned and informed by the works of those who have explored how the future is imagined by Muslim women in diverse contexts through funerary lamentations and songs (Abu-Lughod 1993b) Islamic sermons (Liberatore 2013) and religiously imbued discourses and practices of genealogy (Smid 2010), what follows will extend and build upon these explorations through placing such diverse discourses in explicit conversation with another, considering religious and everyday navigational imaginations simultaneously.

In this final chapter, I therefore want to draw into focus the ways that women here think about the future on earth, with how they think about death and the afterlife. Whilst the former appears shadowy and uncertain, the latter are things they contemplate and discuss with varying levels of excitement and certainty: “*ki sasti hobe!*” [What punishments will happen!] they would giggle, telling me again of how I would be made to walk across a path the width of single human hair over a fire so intense its heat was unimaginable.

In her work in Guinea amongst Muslim women, Smid notes a similar pre-occupation with death and the afterlife amongst her collaborators (Smid 2010). Within the narratives she recorded, there too existed the intermingling of the everyday and the fantastic, in which stories from Islam were drawn into the same temporal dimension as her interlocutor’s experiences, establishing a continuity and connection with a Muslim past and an imagined Islamic future. She thus underscores that although ostensibly orientated towards death and the afterlife, these narratives and explanations in fact may be understood as those that “shape social actions and conditions, rather than simply reflecting them” (Smid 2010: 48). In this way, the circulation of stories of the afterlife may also be less concerned with death and have more to do with “different approaches to leading a Muslim life” (Janson 2011).

Though reflecting Smid’s stance that these stories are more about life than death, there are some prominent differences that exist between our two ethnographic contexts. For her collaborators, these stories worked in a way to sanctify their everyday work and struggles endured as women, bestowing divine significance on exhausting quotidian tasks “achieving Allah’s redemption being their asserted objective.” (Smid 2010: 37). This was something manifested particularly in relation to their husbands,

with whom they shared sharply contrasting and deeply unbalanced intensities of labour. In this way, there existed an explicit “use of the afterlife to motivate...daily performances of marital duties” (Smid 2010: 45). Further, there existed clear and observable connections between present actions and outcome in the afterlife (ibid 2010). In Tarakhali, women’s stories failed to possess any such structural comfort or inequality mollifying significance. In contrast, there existed pervasive vagueness about the relationship between actions and outcomes, complemented by a continual deferment of judgement as something impossible to predict or to foreclose, resting in only one, unobtainable place: “sudhu Allah janen” [only Allah knows]. As will become clear, the location of knowledge with God fundamentally underscores these women’s words, dreams and possibilities.

In what follows, I will begin with the past, with the stories and words that are spoken about the dead in this village. These will include the funeral improvisations that I began this thesis with as well as the stories told by those here of those who have departed. I will consider what role such vocalisations play in what is the gendered nature of death and dying seen across South Asia (Das 1996) and question why it is at these moments and at these times that women are those most able to speak. I will argue as others have done (Das 1996) that there exists an inherent healing potentiality within the words and narratives of women here deployed as balm in moments of loss and passing.

Reflecting the work of Smid (2010) I will illustrate that, for these women in Tarakhali, these narratives of death and dying extend temporally in both directions, and may thus be more about how to live (Janson 2011) than how to die. As such, they link the lives of these women to Islamic paradigms found in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, emphasising genealogical connections with potent Islamic female ancestors. In addition, stories about restless corpses, about angels and about divine punishments meted out on earth, all of which are said to have happened here in this village or in its immediate surroundings, utilise forms of the social imaginary (Vigh 2008) to underscore the Islamic nature of the landscape itself, as well as the lives of those who have come before them.

I will move on to look at the future, and specifically consider the role of punishment after death. A focus on the afterlife here treads a middle path between the reformist tenets of the Tablighi Jama’at that preach a privileging of the afterlife over this-worldly matters, and actions that could themselves be seen as *shirk*<sup>31</sup>, in the circulation and consumption of videos that depict what awaits us after death. The fascination with this visual economy of punishment and suffering offers insights into women’s desire to defer judgement in this life, until after death.

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<sup>31</sup> The sin of idolatry or polytheism in Islam.

Finally, I will consider the dreams women have here. Weaving in these vivid recollections of strange meetings or divine connections, I will contrast these with the dreams women articulated for their daughters in this life, and how both of these sets of expressions possess an aspirational yet otherworldly quality, a reminder of how “stories can be changeable and unfinished, imperfect and power laden; the truth they reference may be elusive” (Pinto 2014: 31).

What emerges from these discussions are juxtaposed and inherently conflicted understandings of Islam that exist for these women in this moment. It is something that is experienced as both restrictive and coercive in terms of the visions it offers and outlines whilst it appears simultaneously as a site of defiance and deep creativity, filled with possibilities for the female future. Islam as they understand it is both of these things, offering a path though it is one that they wish to forge for themselves as opposed to having male, outsider others, forging it for them (Raheja & Gold 1994).

I will end by returning once again to that moment at which these women stand, entwined with one another, watching as *nani* Ashima’s body departs, holding and comforting each other, with their minds turning to their children’s school work, *dadar kaj*, dinner, and the challenges of tomorrow, slowly dispersing towards their homes and their families or standing still, squinting into the sun.

[REDCATED]

Figure 18: Sara

Sara would like to leave Tarakhali. She possesses the both incongruous and slightly desperate air of someone struggling to transcend their surroundings, though there are strong yet invisible ties that bind her to the land on which she lives that have come to make leaving seem almost unthinkable to her. The family of her husband are buried in the graveyard that lies on the southern edges of this village, where all those of Tarakhali are entombed. That such spaces have elsewhere become symbolic of deep Islamic divisions within villages (Janson 2011) is indicative that the physical site in which one is buried, and those by whom one is surrounded, are of paramount importance in underscoring religious, kin and community connections. Sitting with chipped cups of tea on her threadbare sofa one afternoon, she broke a comfortable silence to say “My father-in-law, my mother-in-law and my brother-in-law are all here, they are all buried in this land. How could we leave it? How could we leave them?”.

Muslim women like Sara play a potentially paradoxical role in their interactions with the dead. Practically, they are unable to attend to their deceased ancestors. Under the stricter interpretations of Islam as nurtured by the Tablighi Jama’at, women here are explicitly prohibited from even entering graveyards due to the perceived negative potency of these spaces to which they, as females, are particularly vulnerable. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the participation of elderly widowed women such as Khozana in the *Shaab-e-Barat* festival, in which forgiveness is sought for the sins of one’s ancestors, is under increasing scrutiny within the village.

In spite of this, “it is women who become possessed in their grief over the dead” (Grima 1992: 59). It is only women and their children in Tarakhali, as is customary for Muslims elsewhere (Grima 1992; Janson 2011) who would sit with the body of the deceased whilst the preparations for burial were made. It was only the women and occasionally younger girls who would engage in the highly vocal and emotionally expressive lamentations and wailing that continue until the body departs the home, these intense practices being described by those who undertake them as “like ‘burning charcoal on the deceased’s body’” (Janson 2011: 101).

Such expressions I observed in Tarakhali were, like those that Grima explores in Paxtun culture, “spontaneous but formulaic” (Grima 1992: 59). They followed a prescribed pattern in which the kinship term of the deceased was called out almost continually (in this case *nani*, or grandmother), and these calls would periodically soften when someone would articulate a memory, a characteristic they were fond of, a regret that they would never be able to share an interaction with the deceased again, before ending with an emphatic “Oh *nani*!” and the sound would be absorbed once again in the group’s sobs and recitation of her name. For *nani* Ashima, this all occurred despite the fact that her

death was not unexpected, and she was an elderly lady coming naturally to the end of her life span (Grima 1992: 61).

In contrast to what has been observed elsewhere (Das 1986; 1996) there is no role for outsiders within these lamentations for the deceased. Only those women related by blood, marriage or by deep, neighbourly proximity to the dead will participate in the wailing and chanting, whilst other women less intimately connected will weep quietly or comfort them, or arrive only to briefly pay their respects before departing once again. It was partly for this reason that *nani* Ashima's passing was the only one that I was able to observe so closely, as I was familiar enough with her family and her neighbours for my presence for those hours to be deemed to be permissible as opposed to intrusive.

The distinct and unusual nature of these funeral lamentations in their communal and public display of female emotion and grief mean that it is at first appealing to consider them in isolation from the other kinds of discourses about death that are the preserve of Muslim women in this village. Yet in doing so, others have emphasised that one risks severing the inherent connections they possess with other forms of women's words, and "to lose sight of the complex way death is lived by those it leaves behind" (Abu-Lughod 1993b: 188). Thus, following Abu-Lughod (*ibid*) I have chosen to consider them as part of a pantheon of different kinds of talk that women engaged in within Tarakhali, to speak specifically about the dead.

In addition to the lamentations that women would undertake when someone died, there were other more quotidian ways in which they sought to "detail in a soulful and reflective way the sentiments associated with bereavement" (Abu-Lughod 1993b: 188). In contrast to Abu-Lughod's experiences amongst Bedouin women in Egypt, these did not take the form of songs sung about the dead (*ibid*) that facilitated a spontaneity of structure and a privileging of individual connection and memory, but in a similarly generous form, which was that of stories.

Women's words around death in Tarakhali thus continued long past the deeply emotional and grief-stricken moments at which someone passed away. Stories of those who had died were in constant circulation around the village, ranging from fond memories recalled of family members, instructive stories to illustrate the virtues of living a particular sort of life, or issued firmly as stark warnings of what could happen if one were to behave with certain kinds of impropriety.

Kaki spoke constantly and in a happy, almost reverential manner, of the husband that she lost many years ago. "tomar chacha khub bhalo manoush chilo..." [Your uncle was a very good man] she would begin, before describing how whilst he was working on the Indian railways, he had allowed her to return from Kolkata where his family were living to stay in her father's house in Tarakhali (an almost



unthinkable liberty, particularly for a woman at that time) or had taken his job so seriously that he had won several internal awards for his commitment to service. Her husband, like many of the other deceased, was always noted as *lomba* (tall), *sundor* (beautiful or handsome) and *sposto* (clean, but here meaning light or fair-skinned), the most desirable of physical attributes.

Such warm and affectionate articulations about the dead may seem obvious, even expected, within these circumstances. Yet they were notable here for a further reason, which is that they were the preserve of women only. Men do not participate in funeral lamentations, only arriving at the home of the deceased to collect the body to take it to the *masjid*. They are reluctant to even speak about the dead, refusing to be drawn into discussions of those who had died and remaining quiet when they were brought up by women in the flow of conversation. As noted by Das elsewhere in India, in contrast to the dominance of male speech in the realm of the living, “in the case of death they become mute” (Das 1996: 81).

This was most notable on the day in which Aksha’s daughter-in-law Remiya’s 10-year-old brother was killed by a lightning strike. Having returned from the house of the deceased, the women sat around the Loskor homestead deep in conversation about what had happened, praising the attributes of the young boy who had shown exceptional promise and lamenting his untimely passing. Remiya’s father-in-law Ali-Hami, and husband Purtab, sat apart, adamant that they would not participate in the conversation. Over the following days, when women would arrive at the tea shop and offer their condolences to Aksha, asking for further details about what had happened, if present the men would slip away, returning to the house behind or heading into the bazaar.

It may be tempting to view male silence here as a perhaps predictable instantiation of male piety and female impropriety. In other contexts, the collective praising of the piety of the deceased immediately after they have died has been shown to spark deep divides within Muslim communities (Janson 2011) with reformist adherents believing such sentiments and expressions should always be reserved for Allah and the Prophet. Others have understood the prominent role of women in such gendered practices around death as a mechanism through which hierarchical Islamic religious norms may somehow be underlined, with women embodying religious transgressions through behaving in ways that are doctrinally condemned or frowned upon (Abu-Lughod 1993b). In this way the severity and awfulness of death is manifested as something “so terrible that it prevents them from maintaining faith” (Abu-Lughod 1993b: 202).

Yet in Tarakhali, this sharply gendered divide appeared to be lacking an element of such conflict surrounding Muslim piety, something that arguably makes it more intriguing. These practices were not amongst those that were ever mentioned as now problematically un-Islamic by women in the

village, in contrast to many of their other habits and preferences which they had come to appraise with such newfound critical scrutiny, nor were they ever the subject of condemning sermons in the weekly Tablighi Jama'at women's *madrassa* meetings.

This is in contrast to elsewhere in South Asia, where funerals have become sites of contestation where “different ritual regimes compete with one another in the context of bereavement and cause much distress” (Haniffa 2008: 364). The practices considered problematic in Haniffa's ethnography by Islamic reformists, were arguably far subtler than the extremely public funeral lamentations of women in Tarakhali, that nonetheless escaped the focus of Tablighi Jama'at discussions in this village. As will become evident in what follows, the Tablighi Jama'at did articulate a very clear vision of the role of women around death and dying, namely that their gender means they are those that will most likely be subject to punishment after death, that did not include any condemnation of these funerary practices.

Further, there was lacking in these narratives and expressions the moral evaluation of other women and their behaviour by other women that so characterize other accounts of the gendered space of mourning (Abu-Lughod 1993b). Women in Tarakhali did not appraise the participation of other women in mourning rituals and lamentations in terms of religion or of piety, never commenting when others visited households where individuals had died or became distraught in their grief for those who had passed away, or when they spoke at length of the dead. The only way such moments were critiqued would be by those such as Aksha (who recall mocked the grief of some of *nani* Ashima's mourners in the Introduction) who would do so on the basis that such public and emotive expressions of bereavement were viewed as not in keeping with the relationships that had existed in life between those mourning and the departed.

In her rich explorations of violence, death and the aftermath of such 'critical' events (Das 1996), Veena Das has urged us to “think of healing as a kind of relationship with death” (Das 1996: 78). Within these healing practices in which the brutalities of death are confronted and their accompanying devastation and tension navigated, there exists a notably gendered division. Whilst it is men who attend to the body of the deceased, it is women who shoulder the primary role of restoring a sense of balance to life through language (Das 1986; 1996). In doing so, women do not ignore or deny the fundamental destruction or brutality brought by death, but rather deploy these linguistic healing practices in which the world is “transformed into a world in which one can dwell again, in full awareness of a life that has to be lived in loss” (Das 1996: 68-69).

If we understand the practices of women in Tarakhali in this light, as the linguistic embodiments of ways in which women seek to heal the tragedy and upset caused by death, the lack of moral appraisal

in relation to Islam may perhaps become more understandable. Elsewhere in fact, others have similarly identified the power of diverse forms of narratives as a primary component of healing possessing a deep Islamic lineage within South Asia (Flueckiger 2003). In light of this perhaps we can understand why Aksha criticises the mourners, by calling into question their need to heal the loss that they have suffered. This healing aspect is underscored by another reason why these stories of the departed are significant here which is that within this village such deeply-felt and loving words would never be spoken of anyone living. In a cut-and-thrust emotional environment in which overt sentiments are extremely rarely displayed, these stories and memories held a weight and a potency that marked them out.

There undeniably exist practical reasons for women here to refrain from praise in life, such as fears of *kharap drishti*, the evil eye prominent across India. There also existed a pervasive wariness towards *hingsha* or jealousy of others noted as something particularly acute in the Bengali consciousness (Lamb 2000), which here was also associated with the possibility of being caught by *jinn*. Yet, nonetheless, the warmth and tenderness of these recollections and memories placed them apart, rendering them perhaps as much about remembering and celebrating the qualities of the dead as healing the souls of the living.

The challenge Sara articulates in ever leaving Tarakhali due to the bodies of her in-laws, is one articulated as seriously and with as much concern as any this-world limitation. Women who had lost their parents spoke about the people that they had been with an intensity of emotion which contrasted sharply with the matter-of-fact way in which they confronted significant challenges and adversity on a daily basis. The ever pragmatic Aliya talked of her father with a mournful gaze into the distance, in contrast to the calm and matter-of-fact way she discussed her husband's mental illness or the loss of their land and the downfall of their family. Even Aksha grew emotional when describing the babies that she had lost in miscarriages, whispering one evening that she had become convinced that I was somehow the embodiment of the soul of one of her children who had come back to dwell with them.

Some of the stories of the dead were, however, more disturbing. I was present for several other deaths in Tarakhali, always announced in the same way to the village through the *masjid* loudspeakers, notifying the community of who had passed away and summoning the men to perform the special *namaz* at a time later on that day, in order to allow for the necessary preparations to take place. The women were not called, but as shouts or hurried visits passed between households that were close neighbours or family members of the deceased, they too would quickly finish their chores, pull their saris over their heads, and hurriedly make their way to the home of the departed.

The morning after one such burial of a young man the day before, a story began to whip around the village. The man who had died the day before had been very sick, returning from working and staying outside the village to Tarakhali in order to live at his father's house in the village for the last three months before eventually succumbing to his illness. In spite of consulting various doctors and taking a host of different medicines, nothing had been able to cure him. As the body was being prepared to be buried later on that afternoon, a strange thing had happened. As the women were wailing and mourning the deceased, a white cat had arrived at the house. This cat, it was recounted solemnly, had been particularly affectionate to the man in his life, and it too thus begun to wail alongside the women. Gradually, it moved towards the body, and with tears streaming from its eyes, had laid down next to the corpse and had died.

"It was an angel!" Nura had said. Aliya had agreed, interpreting it as a sign that "Allah ekhane thakche" [Allah is staying here]. Others described the animal as being larger than a normal cat, perhaps the size of a dog or a tiger, "shaada bagh chilo!" [it was a white tiger!] children ran past, screeching in excitement and fear. Some women believed that though the cat was not an angel, it had nonetheless been sent by Allah to look after the man with whom it had shared such an intimate and special bond in life, illustrative of his benevolence and care towards those who were suffering.

Others were sceptical. The man was said to have been violent, his untimely end the result of his own making. The wife of the *imam* of the *boro masjid*, whom I had sought out to ask his opinion only to find him not at home, confided that she believed there were rumours that the man was an alcoholic (rumours I later corroborated from several different sources), which was why he had become sick and died at such a young age. There had been a cat, she conceded, and it had died, although this was just from sadness, illustrative of the bonds that can form between people and animals. "Do you not remember when Cheeta died?" she had asked, referencing the deep mourning her husband had sunk into when his beloved cat had been hit by a car on the tarmac road only the month before.

On another morning, Nura began to talk about her grandmother. She had been a kind but simple woman who was deeply religious and loved to perform the *namaz*. This was notable, as she was living at a time when the overt practices of faith were far less established here and the Tablighi Jama'at had never even been heard of in these remote villages. The *masjid* in the village she had lived in was just a small mud-built construction and there was no *azaan* flowing across the jungle fields and forest to announce the arrival of the hour of prayer. This was also a time in which life was far more challenging. An absence of electricity, roads, shops or any other such amenities meant the majority of people living here were reliant on cultivating the land in order to survive. Work was thus the primary focus and the frequent breaks taken by Nura's grandmother in order to perform her ablutions and then to pray were thus increasingly resented by her husband. One day, when in spite of his chiding she was

dutifully performing her *namaz*, he arrived home unexpectedly. Flying into a fit of rage, he kicked her, causing her to collapse and whether through shock or from insult, to pass away. Gentle and well-liked, the village mourned as she was buried promptly in keeping with custom, and the word slowly spread about what had happened.

A few days later, perhaps chastened, performing his own *namaz*, Nura's grandfather died suddenly. Quickly buried, there was unease amongst the village, perturbed by these sudden quick passings and the manner in which they had occurred. A few days later, murmurs of shock ran through the community as the news spread that Nura's grandfather's grave had been disturbed and that his body was no longer in the earth, lying instead beside the earthen hole. "It was punishment" Nura said, fixing me with her dark and penetrating eyes, brushing her hands and making to raise her considerable frame from the low stoop and continue with her morning's work.

Nura's grandfather was not the only unburied corpse that was haunting the minds and conversations of those in Tarakhali. There were frequent references from Maryam and others to a woman from a village near Mogharhat, around half an hour from the village. Their descriptions centred upon what was thought to have been her morally dubious existence, the insinuations being that she had maintained various relationships with men other than her husband in the village, 'ki bodmash chilo!' [what a bad person she was!]. Her body had too risen up from the ground after death, refusing to stay buried in spite of the repeated attempts of the increasingly disturbed villagers. Eventually it had been torn apart and eaten by wild dogs. "okhane jao ar jiggasha koro – sobai jane!" [Go there and ask...everyone knows!].

If someone has behaved so badly during their lifetime, it is widely believed here that Allah would refuse to let their body stay buried. In doing so, God is denying them the honour of a swift and proper burial, something highly prized by Muslims here as elsewhere. In the case of Nura's grandmother, the impious and cruel way in which her grandfather had ended her life had meant that his remains were destined to never lie within the earth. Some twenty minutes from the village in the other direction, there was another incident of the body of a man who had behaved in a similarly abusive fashion towards his wife refusing to stay buried, moving around each night from the freshly dug up earth. It is necessary to tease apart these stories of the dead in Tarakhali into separate, though intimately intertwined, strands. First, there are the cherished memories of those departed, in which praise is emphatically given and warmth and deep-felt sentiment expressed in ways never able to be done to the living. Then, there are angels, and the bodies that refuse to remain buried, their predicament stemming from their ethically questionable behaviour during life. These are sometimes people known, and sometimes not, but regardless they remain somehow both temporally and spatially more distant.

If we understand the articulation of the former sentiments as undoubtedly a celebration of those gone, yet perhaps even more significantly focused on healing those left behind, what are these latter kinds of fantastic and unnerving stories doing? Given the permeable divides between homes and neighbours through which gossip swirled through the village, are we really to believe that Nura and Aliya were not aware of the alcoholic and violent character of the man who died when they proclaimed there to have been an angel? And if dead bodies here are, following Das (1996), understood to be the preserve of the male domain within this deeply gendered landscape of death, how should we understand these restless corpses? In the section that follows I will move from stories of the dead that occur on earth to those of a deep religious past and the afterlife, moving towards answers to these questions.

### *Linking Lives*

There is a tree in paradise. Like the Tara tree in this village, it is an unusual one. On it are an unimaginable multitude of leaves upon which the life details of every single person on earth are recorded. When a leaf falls to the ground, this signifies that someone has died. One of the many angels that stay with Allah will go to the foot of the tree, pick up the leaf and then go to the place at which the person has just passed away. Once there, they will collect the soul of the dead and bring it in order to receive judgement.

The events of our entire lives, both good and bad, have been constantly and consistently recorded, perhaps some suggest, by an angel sitting upon either shoulder. These will be extensively examined and ultimately weighed against one another to decide whether a person will go to *jannah* or to *jahannam* for eternity. As this evaluation takes place, each individual will be required to walk along a path, as thin as the width of a single hair, hotter than anything imaginable and sharper than a blade. Some will be stopped as their sins are discovered, others will fall into the fires of *jahannam* below and some will succeed in making this crossing and being permitted to enter *jannah*. Although one can endeavour to influence one's fate through the performance of "certain kinds of virtuous actions" (Smid 2010: 47) such as prayer, good deeds and embodying the principles of Islam, only Allah knows where one will end up.

Women's fascination with the afterlife has been shown to be prominent in a diversity of Muslim cultures (Liberatore 2013; Smid 2010). Though there were slight variations or embellishments on the above representation, such as Nura's analogy that life on earth needs to be treated seriously and diligently like an exam for the afterlife, or Aliya's conviction that at the moment of judgement each body part would be asked in turn how it had sinned, the above description is generally representative of what women in Tarakhali thought would happen to all of us after death. There was always the short time before one's soul was collected, the unbearable walk along the path, and the ultimate judgement awaiting us at the end of it.

The imagery used to describe paradise was deeply familiar and seemingly inextricably linked with the surroundings of the village itself. There were beautiful plants and flowers, trees heavy with fruit that could be picked, only to regrow instantaneously, and an abundance of vegetables and plants that could be consumed. There were fresh, clear, clean ponds teeming with fish, and animals to be killed and eaten. There were *pukka* houses that cleaned themselves, pots and pans that cooked, and the absence of ever having to do one's own work here. As elsewhere (Smid 2010) a paradise imagined as "a place of rest" (Smid 2010: 48) free from the "physical labour" (Smid 2010:48) that dominates the lives of women in this world, was prominent in all women's descriptions.

Such an absence of work complements their articulated resistance here to any portrayal of their daily labours as somehow religiously mandated or productive. If anything, they resented their deeply gender-imbalanced workload as an obstacle to allowing them to pray as often as they would ideally like to, well aware of the need to devote as many hours as possible to piety in this world in order to stand the best chance of a favourable outcome in the next. Thus, whereas in other contexts these stories enabled women to construct an idealized female Muslim existence in which present toil is grounded in past labours and rewarded in possible futures (Smid 2010), in Tarakhali stories of the dead and from Islam, seemed if anything to further challenge and problematize the nature of women's existence here in the village, in the present.

In another sharp contrast, the cultivation of notions of an abstracted, Islamic religious time by Smid's collaborators works to ultimately provide security and stability, in recasting quotidian challenges as necessary obstacles to becoming part of a pre-ordained and sanctified Islamic future (ibid). This generates certainty regarding specific actions having clearly identifiable outcomes in the afterlife, the tolerance of a difficult husband, for example, directly resulting in entry into paradise. As will be seen in what follows, in contrast there was marked uncertainty and openly professed ignorance in Tarakhali with respect to what would happen at the point of judgement. "Only Allah knows" was all that the women would say.

The figure of Hawa, or Eve was venerated by those Smid worked with as the first ancestor to whom they endeavour to articulate genealogical links. These practices are not dissimilar to those of Sufi lineages within South Asia (Flueckiger 2003) and elsewhere, in which individuals insert themselves "performatively" (Flueckiger 2003: 260) into "an authoritative line" (Flueckiger 2003: 260) in order to certify their spiritual and religious power and potency in the present. Contrastingly for Smid's interlocutors, these women's own physical weaknesses are identified as directly resulting from this lengthy yet discernible chain, particularly the need for women to menstruate, which is interpreted as a product of eating the fruit from the tree. Though the eating of the forbidden fruit is thus mentioned, and plays a lasting role in detrimentally affecting women's lives, it is something with which

“women’s inferior position was not typically associated” (Smid 2010: 39) though this was nonetheless enforced elsewhere in the creation story’s re-telling (ibid 40).

Within Tarakhali, it was not the story of Hawa, but that of Fatima which women placed most prominently in their narratives. One morning when we spoke, Maryam had been thinking about Fatima. “fatimar kotha sunecho?” [Have you heard about Fatima?]. She believed the day to be that on which she had died many centuries previously, and thus an Islamic religious holiday. As the youngest daughter of the Prophet, she is a well-known female figure within the early days of Islam, though given the schisms that occurred within the faith’s development at this time, not without controversy.

When Fatima died, her soul had become the subject of a dispute between Allah and *sheitan*, the latter of whom wanted to deny her any expedient or special treatment. Allah had approached *sheitan* and said that he wanted to take Fatima’s soul straight to *jannah* without the need for her to endure the typical procedures of judgment. Allah stated his reasons clearly, saying that Fatima had been an embodiment of piety. She had performed no sins during her life time, had always performed her *namaz* every single day and had lived a truly good and virtuous Muslim life. She was thus deserving of this right. *sheitan* refused to allow this, saying simply “How do I know? How do I know that she is free from the need for punishment?”.

At an impasse they thus both began to approach her body. Though she was dead, Fatima moved. She split the ground open with a yawning, 7ft wide chasm, which prevented *sheitan* from coming any further. Relenting, he departed, allowing Allah to approach the body of Fatima and collect her soul which he took straight to paradise. Having recalled this story Maryam spent many minutes describing *jannah*, the deep pools filled with fish, the abundance of naturally growing fruits and vegetables that could be eaten, and the need to do no work. She then stopped herself, paused, before saying “ki age...alada manosh jono, sasti lagbe” [But before, for other people, judgement is needed].

Over time I heard a lot about Fatima. Often during meandering conversations around death or judgement, women would pause and ask, “You know the story of Fatima?” as if just wanting to confirm that I was aware of this powerful, female figure, and perhaps the role she had to play in their understandings of the afterlife. One day during a discussion with a group of women on the path that ran from Nura’s house up towards Aliya’s home, they became so animated in the retelling of the stories that they had laughingly enacted the splitting of the ground, stamping on the cracked earth that had been baked dry by the sun.

In contrast to those of Smid’s ethnography (Smid 2010), the women here did not valorise Hawa, the first woman whose fallibility had prompted the fall from paradise. Instead it was Fatima with whom they sought to continuously establish links through the retelling of her story. In doing so, they also



connected themselves to a yawning religious past, that was nonetheless drawn into and somehow manifested as the temporal present through their gleeful re-enactment of her power.

Arguably, Fatima is an even more explicitly Islamic figure than *Hawa* for them to have identified as their most celebrated Muslim ancestor, being the Prophet's daughter. Secondly, she is regarded as having been an ultimate embodiment of the principles of Islam and of piety, to the extent that Allah considers her free from requiring judgement (something that everyone is submitted to) and instead deserving of going straight to *jannah*. She is also a powerful woman, ultimately possessing the ability to stop the devil in his tracks.

There are other features of Fatima's story that have resonance with narratives around death and the afterlife in circulation in the village. Like those that are spoken about elsewhere, her corpse too becomes animated, striking out against the earth in order to protect herself from being taken to judgement by *sheitan*. She is also described by Allah in the kind of exemplary language that is reserved by women here for the dead. These reverential descriptions of Fatima are not confined to Allah. As with the other dead ancestors about whom women speak in Tarakhali, Fatima is praised and lauded in similarly hyperbolic language as fair skinned, dark haired, beautiful, good and loving of her faith.

In his exploration of *jinnealogy*, the cultivation of relationships with *jinns* to trace historical links and connections, at Firoz Shah Kotla in Delhi, Taneja identifies the figure of Fatima as one that might provide an alternative, non-patriarchal reading and interpretation of the Islamic faith. He describes the Prophet as repeatedly underscored in the *Quran* as "as a loving father of a daughter and not of sons" (Taneja 2017: 145), his preference for his only female offspring over his male heirs something particularly striking. Furthermore, it is emphasised that the Prophet preferred the company and characteristics of women over those of men, "especially the loving relation with his daughter" (Taneja 2017: 7). It is thus possibly even more significant that these women have chosen this powerful, virtuous Islamic figure who was loved deeply by the most significant figure in their faith, as the one with whom they seek to underscore genealogical connections.

Within times of chronic crisis, Reynolds Whyte has suggested that practices of genealogy, of remembering pasts and ancestors and speaking of future generations, is one of the primary ways in which individuals "experience time" (Reynolds Whyte 2008: 99) and overcome feelings of a-temporal stasis, provoked by the deep uncertainty of the present and the future. Thus, the stories of ancestors, in the case of women here both intimate and exemplarily Islamic, can be understood as "laden with meaning and morality" (Reynold Whyte 2008: 99) that possess the capacity to ground and offer commentary on current experiences as well as inflecting and influencing future projects. For those in

such times of crisis this may be “more than a chronology because it is lived and experienced as lifetimes intertwined, and because it may be cyclical as well as linear” (Reynolds Whyte 2008: 99).

In this way, stories about the dead and ancestors are not just about healing, but also about the way in which people can imagine a future for themselves, through the cyclical and ultimately future-inflecting movement of time. These historically embedded articulations are speaking to both presents and possible futures. They offer protection, recall how Khozana recited the names of her ancestors when encountering a *jinn* in Chapter 4. There is something in these narratives and memories of death in which it seems links are being articulated to different kinds of ideal lives, that may yet come to be lived. There are questions also being asked about the future, which grow no clearer when one turns to consider the forms of punishment that may take place.

### *Economies of Punishment*

If women spoke lovingly of the dead, excitedly of bodies that refused to stay buried and proudly of their ancestor Fatima, punishment was discussed with a morbid fascination. The stories told by women here about the punishments that could be sustained after death were not only deeply imaginative but incredibly disturbing. They were often thematically bound up with the forms of sin that one might have committed. For example, failing to cover one’s head at the appropriate times such as the sound of the *azaan* or when in the presence of unfamiliar men, would result in giant birds continuously pecking one’s skull open and eating what was beneath the bone. Speaking in an inappropriate or blasphemous way about Allah would lead to one’s tongue being ripped out, only to regrow and be ripped out again. There was boiling water, giant animals such as snakes, wasps and spiders, a heat so extreme that it would melt the skin off and a cold so unimaginably freezing that it would draw one’s innards outwards through the skin. There was a significant emphasis on repetition, on the occurrence of these punishments over and over and over again. Similarly, whereas the contrasting temporal character of the fleeting, this worldly life and the enduring and infinite afterlife was considered reverentially in the case of *jannah*, for *jahannam* it hung in the air as an ominous threat or warning of a stretching, and torturous eternity.

For some women in the village, the images of punishment which they have stem in the first instance from their earliest religious instruction. Those such as Khozana, who attended a *madrasa* school, recall being told these kinds of stories when they were as young as four years old. As with so many other things here, it appeared that the boundary between childhood and adulthood was flimsy and porous, and one that these quite terrifying and violent images were easily able to permeate.

Even those who do not attend *madrasa* schooling gain exposure to these kinds of tales through the religious instructions of their family members. One day during a conversation with Khozana and her daughter-in-law Farhaza around death and the afterlife, I noticed that Shamsia, only 8 years old, was murmuring something whilst skipping around our chairs. She was saying over and over again “agni jacche, agni jacche, agni jache” [she is going to the fire]. Though Shamsia does not attend *madrasa* school, Khozana revealed that she had forcefully explained the relationship between sinful acts and punishments to her grand-daughter since she was old enough to listen, though it was unclear which of the three of us in conversation she had been talking about.

As adults, the concept and understanding women have of punishment are now compounded by the teachings of the Tablighi Jama’at. The focus on the horrific spectre of punishment after death as a mechanism by which to promote certain behaviours during life is something noted as prominent within this particular reformist movement (Robinson 2008). Robinson goes as far as to identify the founder of the Tablighi Jama’at, Muhammad Ilyas, as “oppressed by fear of judgement and by whether he was doing enough to meet God’s high standards” (Robinson 2008: 264). These women’s fear with respect to judgement, and the prominent role which it plays within their lives, is arguably thus strongly reflective of this founding ideology and focus.

During the Sunday *madrasa* sermons *shasti*, judgement or punishment, was both a noticeably prominent and a recurrent theme. Throughout the highly instructive and sombrely delivered sermons, women were like others who have embraced the teachings of the Tablighi Jama’at “made powerfully conscious that they must act to sustain Islamic society on earth, if they were to be saved” (Robinson 2008: 264).

There were certain key features articulated by all of the faceless male voices who took turns to lecture from behind the bamboo screen. The most significant was perhaps that women are infinitely more likely to commit sin than men, and thus much more likely to be punished. In fact, so heavily was the balance weighted in favour of men that most of my female collaborators struggled to name a single thing that constituted a male sin from which they could not absolve themselves through prayer<sup>32</sup>. A further significant element was the idiom of the path, with opportunities for sin stretching back on either side, with the need for women to carefully evaluate every single action. What was most striking perhaps was that the sinful actions warned against were thoroughly local and entwined with daily life in Tarakhali: not covering one’s head when visiting the local bazaar; failing to have food prepared at

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<sup>32</sup> There existed the pervasive understanding in Tarakhali that men were able to absolve themselves from sinful acts, typically identified here as gambling, consuming alcohol or infidelity, through the repeated performance of regular prayers.

lunchtime when their husband would return home from work; and, showing an inadequate amount of modesty when bathing in the ponds.

In Tarakhali, there exists a further element to this visual economy of punishment. One evening, during the kind of intensely frustrating and circular conversations in which an outsider attempts to delve deeper into grasping something, I asked Nura yet again how she was so sure that the punishments after death would happen as she described. “dekho!” [Look!] she cried, before asking that her eldest son (who that evening had been part of our conversation) retrieve from the interior room the battered mobile phone handset shared by her and her four children. On this scratched and minute-sized screen, I was shown a grainy video which depicted in spectacular D-List, handy-cam movie fashion the gruesome punishments awaiting after death for those who sinned. Complete with cartoon-like special effects, ridiculous costumes and forms of exaggerated acting that would make some of cinema’s blockbuster hits appear subtle, the film was nonetheless deemed too scary to be watched in full, as after little Radhia had seen just seconds of it last time, she had been unable to sleep “for weeks”.

There were many other videos in circulation depicting similar events. These included one which showed a body that refused to stay buried in the ground, a punishment stemming from a similarly sinful existence as explored previously. Those from the slightly younger generations in Tarakhali were perhaps predictably a lot more aware of these things, although the frequent lack of electricity required in order to charge phones and the poor and intermittent mobile phone signal meant that these clips were hard to see or to get hold of. Nura’s sons assured me however that at the high school they attended, many would gather around before school or during the short breaks between classes and share and watch in that particularly teenage combination of fascination and barely concealed terror.

Aware of the circulation of these visual depictions of punishment, many others in the village were keen to make their displeasure at their existence known. As has been widely documented, visual representations of Allah or the prophet within Islam are a subject that is extremely controversial. Many understand that any forms of visual representation relating to such things are themselves inherently sinful whilst in other contexts Muslims have struggled with desires for creative and artistic expressions that may by definition be morally or ethically flawed.

Both Khozana and Sara were dismissive of these video clips, describing those performing the roles as committing *shirk* through their performance as God or the prophet, and the clips themselves as *illaqa* or sinful. Khozana went further, questioning who had produced these videos and musing that perhaps they in fact were representative of a further way in which to test the faith of Muslims and lure them off the path into committing sin. Within this broader Islamic context, the emergence of such visual depictions of an Islamic afterlife and the judgement it entails is intriguing.

Chris Pinney's recently published work chronicles the extensive visual depiction of punishments after death within Hindu cultures across India. These 'karni-bharni' (reap-what-you-sow) images provide shocking and disturbing visual representations of punishments that may be faced by Hindus when they die, possessing a notable thematic consistency in their depictions in spite of being produced across a span of almost one hundred and forty years up until the present day (Pinney 2018). Crucially, Pinney identifies the subtly shifting nature of the content of such images as reflective of the differing political and piety trends taking place during the time at which they are produced.

Others have detailed the existence of alternative, explicitly Islamic, visual materials in circulation that have depicted punishments after death with equal brutality. Robinson (2008) identifies a pamphlet by an early Deobandi reformer, Ashraf 'Ali Thanwi, that paints a similarly "horrific picture" (Robinson 2008: 263) of what awaits those who fail to heed Allah's instruction, identified by him to be after the *Quran* the most widely reproduced Muslim publication on the sub-continent.

These works may thus prompt considerations of the extent to which these women's beliefs should be understood as Islamic as opposed to somehow the product of a pan-religious, pan-Indian fascination with the afterlife. Further, it should be questioned whether anything more can be gleaned from the varieties of punishments they are focused upon with respect to any political or religious concerns that are currently being experienced. Much as I'm suggesting that stories of the dead here are being used by women to heal the living, their stories of unburied corpses, potent female Islamic ancestors and brutal punishments may themselves be reflecting other aspects of both their lives on earth, and wider political and religious contexts. It is "tempting" (Abu-Lughod 1993b: 203) to understand these kinds of words about death as cultural counter-narratives to a doctrinal Islamic vision, and yet as with others (Abu-Lughod 1993), this is not a claim I wish to make. These women's narratives themselves are hugely shaped and informed by their devout Islamic faith, and what is taking place seems far more complex than their desire to simply author a non-Islamic alternative, in response to the dominant narratives of the Tablighi Jama'at.

That being said, their stories do problematise elements of the Tablighi Jama'at understandings, the first aspect of which is with respect to who exactly will be punished. Contrary to the clearly outlined fate of non-Muslims as going to hell advanced within the Sunday *madrasa* sermons, women here openly articulated a different view. They emphatically underlined that it was not about one's individual religious persuasion, saying of those of other faiths "se bishas kore, ke bishas kore" [those that believe, they believe]. It was instead about one's character and behaviour within life, a part of which was inevitably upholding one's own religious and ethical standards. Thus, a bad Muslim was said by all to go to *jahannam* and a good Hindu to *jannah*.

In a second more subtle way, women were perhaps challenging other aspects of the “who” of who would be punished. Nura’s story of her grandfather, along with that of the other unburied male corpse in a nearby village, explicitly suggested that men were also capable of being punished by Allah after death. In these instances, it was in the most severe way possible, with their bodies being unable to receive proper Islamic burials and their souls thus remaining trapped to wander the earth in purgatory.

Returning to the man who died whilst I was in Tarakhali, how are we to now interpret Nura and Aliya’s claims that the cat is an angel? Could there be a hint of mockery in the proclamation that God would send an angel to accompany the soul of a drunken and abusive man who died as the result of his own actions? Is this fantastical religious instantiation of the white cat a way of challenging the Tablighi Jama’at suggestion that it is really only women who can truly sin in this life? Further, can we then come to think about their powerful ancestor Fatima, as the ultimate embodiment of the truth that a woman, can, in fact, be sinless?

Within these narratives there also seems to be a second challenge posed to the Tablighi Jama’at advanced conception which is what exactly individuals will be punished for.

As stated earlier in contrast to Smid’s ethnography (2010) and to what they were told within the women’s *madrasa* meeting as well as in other discourses circulating around the village, women here steadfastly refused to articulate a direct causal link between actions and specific consequences. When asked repeatedly whether a certain action, such as refusing to veil appropriately when leaving the village, would directly lead to any specific fateful consequences, there would only ever be one answer “*sudhu Allah janen*” [Only Allah knows].

In contrast to women elsewhere such as Liberatore’s young Somali interlocutors in London, the women in Tarakhali did not appear to be using these brutal and terrifying stories to try to induce fear, modify behaviour or cultivate kinds of piety in the present (Liberatore 2013). As was explored in Chapter 3, they are acutely aware of the kinds of prescriptions and articulations made about their lives and their piety, which they nonetheless on an everyday basis refuse to fully embrace and act upon.

In light of this, it seems that some loose and hesitant conclusions can be offered. These women, in contrast to those elsewhere (Liberatore 2013; Smid 2010) appear to be both valorising and deferring the moment of judgement simultaneously. Consequently, they focus significantly upon the point of judgement after death through their consumption and production of stories and images around the kinds of punishment that will stem from this appraisal, whilst at the same time rejecting the attempts by others to draw direct causal links between certain actions and punishments, or specific attributes or characteristics and an inevitable place in *jahannam*.

The repetition of the phrase “sudhu Allah janen” [only Allah knows] is indicative of this understanding of judgement as something that rests with God, and God only, in a rejection of those who claim in this world to be able to identify who is deserving of punishment or not. Perhaps the bodies of those that refuse to stay buried are potent reminders of Allah’s ultimate power in deciding, in those moments after death, one’s fate, regardless of one’s gender. Similarly, the story of Fatima appears to reinforce the sense of that moment of judgement as one in which the prohibitions, assumptions and restrictions of this life melt away, and the truth of one’s actions and existence can be calmly, fairly and dispassionately assessed. Such interpretations and understandings of the ultimate answers resting at the juncture between this world and the world of the afterlife and Allah, appears to be something supported by their dreams, as will be shown in this final section.

### *Dreams and Futures*

Reenu dreams of one day becoming a police officer. Malika’s daughter wants to be both a nurse and a school teacher, excelling in not one, but two highly-prized government jobs. Jaccaria wants to do a university degree once she has finished school, perhaps in literature, and then maybe work for several years, possibly even in the State capital of Kolkata where she has never yet been. Radhia and Shamsia are still too young to have formed dreams of what they wish to be, giggling shyly and hiding behind their hands when asked.

There are two varieties of dreams in Tarakhali. There are those that women have for their daughters, and that their daughters themselves had, about possible futures that extend far beyond this village and transcend their current circumstances. Then there are the actual dreams that women have whilst they are sleeping, in which they communicate with ancestors, encounter God or receive divine inspiration. I want to conclude with the dreams of the women and girls of this village, bringing the discussion of the afterlife to a close in a jarring and uncertain conclusion, in which truth and fiction, real and unreal, lose their salience as categories.

There exists a glaring disparity between the aims and ambitions women have for their daughters here, matched by those of the girls themselves, with the conditions of their socio-economic and religious realities. During the focus groups I held with women around the topic of the future, the possibilities of their daughters’ lives, careers and education were things eagerly spoken about, whilst mutually shared concerns over how they might be able to afford to pay for such things were jokingly discussed amongst neighbours and friends.

Diverse groups of women, their brightly patterned saris stark against the dusty concrete floor of the Club House, spoke emphatically of lives their daughters might lead that would be both vastly different

and significantly improved from their own. They talked about all girls remaining within school until at least Class 12 (18 years old), with education and literacy being crucial for their lives going forward. Then perhaps there might be further studies, or perhaps work, maybe going to find a better kind of employment in Kolkata, maybe waiting until they were older to get married, which their own experiences would suggest as something definitely preferable. Perhaps women could then open small businesses, *choto byabsha*, of their own back near Tarakhali, some might stay within the city, whilst others could provide tuition for their own children, removing the costly need to pay for a tutor to supplement the deeply inadequate state education provision.

These ambitious female aims and desires could be interpreted as the determinedly positive outputs of an impoverished community, that nonetheless possessed the capacity for aspiration (Appadurai 2004). Yet the starkness with which these dreams diverged from the realities of these women's lives rendered them uncomfortable and puzzling pronouncements, like untethered balloons floating aimlessly away from the earth with nothing existing to ground them. How could Aksha speak of the need for girls to stay in education, when her two daughters barely attended school aged just 14 and 16? And how was it possible for Nura to discuss the need for women to work outside of the home when within her household she was subject to extremely strict gendered spatial prohibitions that prevented her from even going to the local bazaar unaccompanied?

Within the abstract, the future was affirmably different and positive. Will women here one day be able to work outside of the home? Of course! Aksha was emphatic in her response, explaining that in order to enable impoverished communities such as theirs to lift themselves out of poverty, it was crucial that the next generation of women were both sufficiently educated and socially permitted to take on these kinds of professions. Yet this was a woman who herself faced repeated allegations that she was a prostitute because she spent so long each day at the [REDACTED] bazaar procuring supplies for her tea shop.

Would men allow these kinds of changes to happen? For women to work outside of the home? "Yes!" Would their husbands allow their daughters to do this? A pause.

There exists here a stark and uncomfortable clash between the beliefs and dreams these women had for their futures and those of their daughters, and the significant obstacles that to an objective observer rendered them not just improbable but impossible to achieve. What made this disjuncture particularly striking was the bluntness and directness with which the women typically assessed their family circumstances or potentialities, such as Aliya's comment noted in Chapter 2 in which she dismissed days without work as being for "*buddhiman dami lok*" [intelligent and rich people], or the cautious ways in which Tabina has to restrain herself from speaking out about bribery in a government office in Canning, until she had obtained the document she wanted.



At this point I would like to return to Vigh's idea of the radical temporal alterity that stems from existing in a perpetual state of crisis (2008). Specifically, Vigh understands this as something that "alters the way we interpret the unfolding of events, namely from linearity to analogy" (Vigh 2008: 17). A consequence of this is that events are not seen as logical and linear progressions from existing circumstances, rather as spontaneous or organic changes that materialise and are then mediated through their relationship with the present.

This is captured in his discussion through his characterisation of the horizon as something that for those dwelling in inherent crisis moves further and further towards the individual (Vigh 2008). In this way, the boundaries between what exists now and may happen in the future slacken, as a result of the perception of wider social structures around us losing their permanence and solidity. Further, comparisons are drawn explicitly with the past, or with other places and peoples in the present, as a way of inverting models of temporal progression that move predictably, reliably forward.

This perhaps explains the existence of the narrative gap between the articulations of the futures for their daughters and the present conditions they are experiencing in reality. As a result of dwelling within such uncertain and shifting times, in which the progression from actions to events lacks a predictable trajectory, there thus exists here a deep awareness of the need for women to harness their huge potential in order to actively improve the condition of their community, with a pervasive absence of how this could be achieved. Or perhaps not.

In moving from the dreams that women had for their daughters to those that they had for themselves, it becomes apparent that it is Islam that was understood as the site of deep promise and creativity from which these significant shifts may flow. The dream that these women had for themselves was clearly articulated and explicitly clear: to one day be able to read the *Quran*. Those such as Khozana whose *madrasa* education provided her with the knowledge of Arabic that enables her to recite, though not understand the meaning of her *Quran*, speaks of the deep sense of satisfaction she derives from this practice. Many women here, who relish their performance of *namaz* for its similarly personal and meditative qualities, say that the imagination of this kind of wellbeing and fulfilment is motivation or impetus enough for them to want to one day be able to read the *Quran*. Others go further. Aliya was emphatic that the kinds of changes that they needed to make to their socio-economic circumstances would come from Islam, already the source of so much strength within their challenging existences. She believed that the answers were there, inherent within the text, though they had just not yet been correctly interpreted and articulated yet, as it was only men who were able to read the *Quran*<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Though this may universally not be the case, within the village this was the understanding that women had. The woman who read the *Quran* during the prayer meeting mentioned in Chapter 3 was identified as, like Khozana, able to recite the Arabic but unable to know what the words actually meant.

The faces of the women came alive as they spoke quickly, excitedly, about the potential for transformation. It was not government documents, nor newspapers, nor the tattered books from school that they had long ago left behind, that they identified as the textual sources from which they would derive the knowledge that would provide them with more autonomy in the future. It was the *Quran* within which they sought the confirmation of what they already widely assumed to be the case, that women could work outside of the home, that girls were as able as boys to have any profession that they wanted, and that sin was not the preserve of women only. They asked me to think, to imagine what it could be like to have something within one's life that was so significant and yet remained to so elusively out of reach. Nura talked about rules, *niyom*, asking weren't the laws that governed what one could and couldn't do in my country accessible for people to read, understand and interpret? Even women?

As has been illustrated in the preceding discussion, the articulation of links to powerful, female Islamic ancestors, a fascination with punishments, and the presence of angels are ways in which these women are actively, narratively drawing Islam into the landscape which surrounds them and cultivating their own understandings of what an Islamic past and an Islamic future could be. In this way, they are deploying the social imaginary in order to tentatively suggest ways in which they can engender changes within the future, as well as cultivate forms of agency for themselves in the present.

This world of the present in Tarakhali has been explored both in this chapter and the thesis in its entirety as the one in which male speech is dominant. The realm of death, and the words and narratives around it, have been shown here to be as elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 1993; Das 1996) the preserve of women. It appears that the future here too is envisaged as one in which women control and author the narratives, with the reading and interpretation of the *Quran* acting as the way in which they are capable of identifying their own path, as opposed to one prescribed by others. Interpreting their articulations and imaginations as fundamentally about how they are also embodied within their present circumstances, reveals a dynamic navigation of challenges and the seeking out of spaces of possibility.

In this way, perhaps the influence of their encounters with the Tablighi Jama'at has had the unexpected, and arguably, unintended, consequence of highlighting for women their need to gain a deeper understanding of their faith. This is reflective of the wider need not to avoid assumptions of straightforward encounters between individuals and such Islamic reform movements, rather to understand them as continuous and ongoing processes (Marsden 2008) that "sometimes produce new and unexpected possibilities of interpretation" (Osella & Osella 2008a: 251).

These women are, like those on the margins elsewhere “women seeking knowledge in a context where knowledge is a male conquest” (Tsing 1993: 216). Knowledge is recognised as the way in which women can alter and affect their circumstances, as other Muslim communities elsewhere in India have explicitly identified learning as the way to empowerment and overcoming marginalisation (Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffery 2004; 2008). Though in contrast for the women in Tarakhali, this is a divinely ordained understanding as opposed to one derived from this world.

There perhaps exists the implicit sense that women, in fact, would be the best suited for the performance of these kinds of roles. After all, is it not women here who remember the dead? who trace links to Fatima? Women who remember the ancestors? who truly understand and think about punishment?

Dreams were a final way in which women seemed to reach their fingertips out into the distance, in search of something tangible, concrete and most definitely Islamic. All of my collaborators spoke to me of dreams which they had had, with a richness and sensitivity characteristic of such articulations across the Islamic world, within which they are often entwined with spiritual insight or potency (Ewing 1994; Mittermaier 2012). As with other Muslims elsewhere, women’s dreams here were always held with a weight and a seriousness deserving of divine or special insight, and spiritual encounter.

Maryam had once dreamed that her son would be in a car accident. She had seen that it would happen the next day, a Friday, when he went to drive his rickshaw up to Canning in search of some hot, midday return fares, as opposed to performing his usual Friday *namaz*. In her dream, Allah had been present, and she had pleaded with him to save the life of her son. She had promised that should he spare him, he would perform *namaz* every single day and never miss another Friday. The next day her son had been in a car accident, broken his arm, but had survived, and Maryam had done her best to ensure that he never skipped his necessary supplications.

Her daughter-in-law Tabina dreamed that she would die but Allah had saved her. It had happened whilst she was in hospital, on one of the three occasions when she has had to have her abdomen sliced open in the dilapidated local medical facility which she viewed with deep scathing and mistrust. She had thought she was going to die, and had drifted into a sleep in which Allah came to her and sat down beside her, taking her hand and telling her that she would survive. She awoke the next day in the hospital, in extraordinary pain, groggy, but alive.

Khozana dreamed of *jinn*, of mischievous boys from the *madrassa* school in the village running down the paths, something unidentifiably out of place in their faces, before they physically transformed into

monstrous apparitions. In the dream, others had run away terrified, hiding under their blankets in the hope these presences would disappear. Not Khozana, who had strode out onto the path on which they were advancing and instructed them to leave, reciting the names of her ancestors who had built their home upon this former jungle. She is *raas bhari* after all.

Nura's aunt had a prophetic dream in which she met with Allah, and he told her all of the ways in which people could be punished after death. She understood that it was her duty to alert others to the potential transgressions they were making and the possible consequences of their actions. So shaken and moved by what she had witnessed, Nura's aunt had devoted the rest of her life to traveling between villages, telling people of what she had seen and warning them of what could happen should they continue to behave in this way.

Sara dreams of living in Kolkata, of living in an apartment block of the kind she has seen on her rare forays into the city. She would like to live high up, with a window from which she can look out onto the city below, marvelling at its largeness and freneticism.

Aliya dreams of *jannah*, or paradise.

Following Han "I do not ask where the real resides, nor do I position the dream as a "threshold" between wakefulness and sleep" (Han 2012: 128). In concluding this chapter with the dreams of women in Tarakhali, I am seeking to allow them to articulate their own ending, whilst I am left with the worry of "how my writing can acknowledge" (Han 2012: 128) both their dreams and their everyday lives in which they are at once living, and imagining, their futures.



Figure 19: The village

## Conclusion

Let us return to the day that *nani* Ashima died. We began with tear-streaked faces, with the deep and indescribable grief of mourning, with the lamentations of women standing watching as the body shakily departed the home on the shoulders of husbands and brothers, unable to join the line of the white clad male mourners who would offer special prayers outside the boro *masjid*, or to accompany a woman they loved to what would be her final resting place.

What we were also witnessing were the unconstrained vocalisations of women articulating and affirming their bonds to one of their own, of navigating the sadness and grief of death through words, memories, stories and song as women across South Asia have done for as long as they can remember (Raheja & Gold 1994; Grima 1992). We were observing the ability of language deployed by women here to heal themselves and others, at moments of loss and uncertainty.

We were perhaps seeing them reaffirm their human, female connections to the departed, and amongst themselves, as they do with ancestors as far back as the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, through recalling and celebrating the sharing of stories, food, games and gossip, exchanges and interactions that are ultimately imbued here with what it is to be female. Theirs may at times be a violent existence here, but it is one which is shared amongst them as women, as are the creative spaces of possibility they weave from it.

The initial stillness of the women matched with the movement away of the men, is a physical enactment of some of the more recent, Islamic gender roles that are being suggested and enforced by the ideology and presence of the Tablighi Jama'at. This event encapsulates that this is a negotiation, with women strictly prohibited from following the body to the graveyard, though able to continue to vocally lament *nani* Ashima, in the kind of expressions of grief and mourning that have been identified in other contexts as the charged targets of reformist scrutiny (Hanaffi 2008; Janson 2011).

As one woman is leaving this village, another is arriving into the house next door. Khozana was right after all to be fearful of the death occurring on her son's wedding day, interpreting it as a bad omen for the prospects of Mubarak and his new bride Nusrat. A few weeks later, Nusrat will become one of those in this village to have been caught by a *jinn*, highlighting the dangers fraught within such transitional moments, and deep uneasiness and unpredictability for those encompassed within this physical and spiritual landscape.

After the men have departed, the slow departure of women down the path from *nani* Ashima's homestead towards their own nearby abodes underscores that this work of mourning is just one of

many kinds of *kaj* that women must undertake here. The relentless pace of everyday life, lived in struggle on the flickering edges of poverty, allows no substantial pause before the evening's work must be resumed, the supper made, the floor swept, the children supervised and the *dadar kaj* continued.

Having made it back just in time to bury her mother, the next time Alima will return here from Delhi will be in a couple of months, in order to cast her crucial vote in the West Bengal state elections. This will be as much about her desire to exercise her democratic right in her beloved *jonmostan*, to which she hopes to return permanently one day, as it is to stave off fears that in not doing so she may no longer be seen as a citizen by the Indian state. As a result of her faith, this may mean she is regarded as someone who truly belongs on the other side of the Bengal border.

With *nani* Ashima's passing, three generations dwelling alongside one another have now become two. Aliya and her daughter have been left behind to continue to navigate their everyday lives and existences, complete with all the challenges and possibilities that they are facing.

In their recent introduction to the compendium *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World*, Venna Das and Clara Han begin with a Buddhist teaching that underscores not the linearity of life, followed by death, but rather their entwined instantiation in which they exist alongside one another in the everyday, simultaneously (Das & Han 2015:1). The authors suggest that should we try to embody such an approach in our ethnographic and theoretical explorations, we may in turn "become attentive to the multiple forms in which human societies generate understanding of life that comes from their varied experiences of how living and dying have been transformed in our contemporary conditions" (Das & Han 2015: 1).

In this thesis I have sought in such a way to explore the rarely considered lives of rural-dwelling Muslim women, in a remote though increasingly connected corner of West Bengal. In doing so, I have followed Das (2013) in her calls to explore violence in a wider range of ethnographic and everyday contexts, most significantly arguing that women's negotiations with, and navigation of, violence here, entail a dynamic forging of subjectivity and cultivation of possibility. My focus on the role of violence in these women's everyday lives and experiences is not, as some have suggested, to in any way confine them to the "suffering slot" (Robbins 2013) within anthropology more widely. Nor is it to indulge in some kind of colonial or mis-guided Western feminist discourse aimed at 'saving' such women (Mohanty 1988; 2012; Spivak 1994) or denying the reality of their own ethical, Islamically informed choices (Mahmood 2005).

Rather my exploration of both the presence, and the productivity of violence here, has been to realistically pay tribute to lives that are lived in struggle, yet within which there remain brilliant,

dynamic and creative endeavours embodying a relentless striving to imagine and achieve a life that is understood as inherently worth living (Han 2012). In doing so, I have continually sought to defer to their lives, their words, and their experiences, in order to convey that “the most ordinary of events” may nonetheless produce “the most extraordinary of experiences” (Das 2010: 232).

The particular urgency to consider such everyday Muslim livelihoods at this present and religiously contentious moment in Indian history has been underscored as necessary (Banerjee 2010; Gayer & Jaffrelot 2012; Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffery 2008) both to offer alternative, subaltern perspectives to the chorus of dominant narratives and to dissolve the stereotypes that exist concerning the forms that such lives take. Further, there remains a need for analyses such as this one which consider *women's* lives as a starting point to open up and tease apart entire life worlds.

Anthropology has made little room for “local women travellers who comment from the margins of ordinary experience” (Tsing 1993: 220). Only in doing so can it be ensured that Muslim women's experiences in ethnographic contexts of South Asia, as well as more widely, do not become unfairly confined to accounts of *purdah*, veiling, kinship or domesticity. As important as these things may be within their lives, they are not a totality. A privileging of women's voices in such geographically arbitrarily (Candea 2007) bounded field sites does not entail a narrowing of perspective (Ring 2006) nor exclude the presence of men, rather it offers an expansion into realms and themes formerly unnoticed or wilfully overlooked that have significant, rippling effects far beyond what might be anticipated.

I have predominantly explored the worlds of key friends and collaborators whose lives I have used to investigate what it is like to live a female, Muslim life in this village of Tarakhali at this moment. This choice was one prompted by their openness, their friendship and their inherent and intriguing diversity, as opposed to any pre-determined plan or structuring device on my part. These women's individual histories, narratives, experiences and dreams have undoubtedly hugely shaped and influenced my discussions. Were I to have focused on the men of Tarakhali, on whom I could write another entire thesis, what has preceded would have undoubtedly been very different. Perhaps moving forward there will be the opportunity to put their biographies, stories and experiences into conversation with those of these women.

The fleeting and transient nature of this encounter is something I have attempted to underscore throughout this thesis. For some reason, there seems a greater need to do this given that this is an ethnography set within a rural Indian village, as opposed to an urban centre, where the fast-paced and constantly changing dynamics of everyday life are assumed as always being a feature of any analysis. Though this village has seen significant transformations in recent decades (Jalais 2010), there have



nonetheless remained stubborn continuities. People are still extremely poor, the majority live within earth-built houses, most struggle to find suitable, stable and well-remunerated forms of work and the aspects of structurally induced poverty continue to significantly hamper the experiences and aspirations of those here. With the promises of development, political change and economic transformation, it will be interesting to see whether the aforementioned features so characteristic of everyday life here will similarly shift in the years to come.

I have argued throughout this thesis that women's lives entail the skilled navigation of various forms of *tenshun* and everyday violence. I have drawn significantly on the work of Veena Das in reflecting an understanding of violence as something shifting, ephemeral, directionless and, at times, all consuming (Das 1990; 1995; 1996; 2007). In doing so, I have sought to tease apart the interplay between national 'critical' events (Das 1995) and deeply local and subjective processes (Das 2013).

I have also sought to underscore the creative and productive possibilities of violence, in generating selves, understandings and imaginations. The intersection between violence and possibility here has been identified as something that profoundly shapes female life worlds, with experiences understood by women here to be violent as often intersecting with potentiality and alluding to what they consider to be distinct possible actions, outcomes and futures.

In focusing on violence within the everyday experience of women, my intention has never been to disempower those with whom I worked, or to somehow reduce their lives to nothing more than quotidian struggles against violence and oppression. As with others whose work considers similarly marginalised and embattled groups in India (Singh 2016) and more widely (Han 2012; Tsing 1993), I have instead tried to illustrate the extraordinary determination, pragmatism and good humour with which they approach life, support one another and utilise the skills they have developed as women in navigating such tensions in other arenas such as political negotiation or the mediation of grief.

The reason that we keep returning to violence in South Asia is something that perhaps needs to be considered further. It is a feature of life remarkably present, both individually and collectively (Brass 2003; Spencer 2004) yet in certain contexts such as domestic violence (Karlekar 2004) woefully underexplored. Within Tarakhali there is scope to examine the other forms and forums in which violence and possibility might be simultaneously occurring, whilst how men experience and understand violence here, particularly their role in its production, is another question that needs answering.

A significant concern of this thesis has been to provide an account of Islam as lived here (Marsden 2005) by rural Muslim women in India. I have thus been less concerned with what Islam is (Sheilke 2010) or how it is instantiated in explicitly religious moments such as the cultivation of piety through

reading the *Quran* for example (Mahmood 2005), instead focusing on how Islam is thought about, practised, understood and critiqued by women as part of their everyday lives (Liberatore 2013).

As a result of this approach, I hope to have shown that the way in which these women live Islam is not predictable or simplistic. This is perhaps best exemplified by the two most prominent ‘Islamic’ concerns that women had whilst I was in the village, being those of the newfound teachings of the Tablighi Jama’at and the increasingly unpredictable presence of *jinn*, two aspects arguably embodying entirely different understandings and interpretations of the faith.

Following others who have studied the impact of reformist Islam within South Asia (Huq 2008; Marsden 2005; 2008; Osella & Osella 2008a), I have sought to avoid any assumption that it is somehow negative, unwanted or ‘un-traditional’, instead exploring how it offers one vision for women’s lives that exists here amongst many. The arrival of the women’s *madrasa* that was under construction whilst I was last in Tarakhali will undoubtedly add a new dimension to this dynamic of negotiation, perhaps one in which the articulation of alternative paths becomes more challenging.

I wonder often whether Nura is still caught by a *jinn*, or whether she has managed to obtain a cure in order to rid her of this unwanted presence. I also wonder whether, if I were to return to the village, the relationships people have with *jinn* might have transformed to more closely resemble their previous incarnation, in which gifts and food were exchanged and shared. In highlighting the violent and uncertain nature of interactions between people and *jinn* whilst I was there, I have provided an account of *jinn* significantly different to other recent explorations elsewhere in India (Taneja 2013; 2017) that can only help to deepen and enrich our understandings of these other worldly presences.

It quickly became apparent that I could not write about these women without speaking of work, *kaj*, given the dominance it plays in their everyday lives. In doing so I hope to have offered further ethnographic input that problematises a simplistic public and private labour binary (Patel 2010) whilst also illustrating the continued, stubborn gender disparity that exists amongst the rural poor in India. I have problematised simplistic understandings that equate female entry into the labour market as an indisputably positive transformation. In particular, I have highlighted many of the challenges posed by the lives of women such as these to microfinance models in their current instantiation, which are failing to prioritise long term solutions to poverty and gender marginalisation within labour markets over short term financial interventions and returns. I have also raised questions about the longer-term impact of daughters working alongside their mothers throughout this thesis, which is something future research can perhaps reveal.

The relationship between women in Tarakhali and the state, both in terms of imagination and reality, remains a deeply surprising and unusual one. How uneducated, impoverished and socially and culturally conservative women have become wily political navigators and the main interface between this village and local bureaucracy has been underscored as in part driven by necessity, and part resulting from their own deep-felt desire to be seen (Street 2014). To what extent these moments are the product of this particular climate is something that future research could address, as is what men feel about their wives, sisters and mothers becoming visible in this way.

I have ended this thesis, perhaps appropriately, with how women approach death, dreams and the afterlife. In doing so I have utilised Vigh's understanding of crisis as a perpetual state of context (Vigh 2008) to draw together all of these death and future-centred narratives and stories. There is so much density in these narratives that they could have been expanded into multiple chapters, and perhaps there will one day be the opportunity to do so, teasing out further similarities and differences and putting them into conversation with far more significant bodies of literature around death and dreaming, which due to the constraints of this thesis I have been unable to explore.

I have underscored that this is an explicitly gendered space (Abu-Lughod 1993b; Das 1996) in which women use words to heal in the present, forge links with the past and articulate a future in which judgement rests. In finally considering their dreams, I have drawn attention to the deep-felt desire for a change in both their own and their daughters' futures, envisaged perhaps as obtainable through an ability to author their own Islamic textual interpretation.

It seems fitting to leave these women dreaming of a future in which they find within Islam the answers that they are looking for. Perhaps this underscores more than anything that there exists here in this Hindu-named Goddess village no clash between religion and modernity, nor tradition and creativity. There are instead encounters, sometimes violent, often imbued with potential and possibility, one of which is envisaged as women using education as a path to obtaining religious knowledge and expertise, which will in turn result in them wielding greater social power and improving gender equality. I hope that one day a generation of women in Tarakhali can fulfil that dream and begin to articulate a path that they themselves have chosen.

[REDCATED]

Figure 20: Shamsia and Sirana

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