This chapter is an attempt to write myself into the ethnographic account and analysis presented in the following chapters. Some clarifications are in order right at the very beginning. This chapter symbolises the clear break this thesis has with social science positivism and ‘objectivism’. The premise on which this chapter has been drafted and included in the thesis is double pronged. On the one hand the writing of autoethnographical essay is based on the assumption that social changes affect an individual’s life, while on the other hand it aims at laying out the researcher’s position and politics out in open following the feminist adage of ‘personal is political’. The account presented here is auto-ethnographical but not autobiographical- its concern is not to present an account of my life, rather, what is presented here is finally a montage of images and impressions of my experience of being a resident of Delhi. These images have been strung together on the thread of reflexive narrative of being a researcher one of whose identity is that of a ‘Muslim Woman’. In this account the temporality of events and experiences is important and I have paid much attention to it but the chronology and sequence is not stressed upon.

Sometimes days pass by before I explicitly think of many of my identities- academician, woman, mother, friend etc-etc. One of my identities, though, crops up more often than all others. I am a Muslim and I have realised that I am required to deal with this
identity more frequently than others because I live in Zakir Nagar in Delhi. While hiring a taxi-rickshaw, calling for pizza delivery, applying for a credit card or for my daughter’s admission in a school - these and hundreds of other everyday tasks become a function of where I live, and the experience that follows invariably reminds me of my ‘muslimness’.

I was born in 1975 in Faizabad and brought to Delhi as an infant, just days after my birth. In my childhood my family used to live in a neighbourhood called Ahata Kedara, Bara Hindu Rao near Sadar Bazar, which was then, a mixed locality of Punjabi Hindus - mostly refugees - who came in after partition and local Muslims in the old Delhi outside the walled city. My parents had migrated from Faizabad in eastern UP just before the emergency in 1973 and always negotiated the insider-outsider dyad both with the Muslims and the Hindus. My family shifted from Bara Hindu Rao to Zakir Nagar, Okhla in 1985 after we were witness to anti-Sikh rioting and massacres in wake of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination. My elder brother was in his late teens and about to finish his schooling - a fact which also prompted my father to decide that it was time to move to Jamia Nagar located then, on the outskirts of Delhi, so that he could study at Jamia Millia Islamia. My two siblings and I, in fact pursued our graduate and post graduate studies from the Jamia.

My connection with Delhi has never been the one that I could take for granted and thus, forget about. My grandfather worked as a boiler mechanic with the Railways in the locomotives days. During each of the summer vacations my family would go back to Faizabad and the moment we exited the Railway station and entered the railway colony, ripples would go through people along the road - Dilli waley bhaiya! Dilli waley bhaiya! (Brother from Delhi) The rickshaws would be stopped again and again and pleasantries would be exchanged. Everywhere I went with my cousins, I would be introduced as Dilli waley mamu ki beti (Daughter of uncle from Delhi). Our trips would not be complete without at least one trip to Ayodhya - the Kingdom of Lord Ram in Ramayana, and twin city of Faizabad. The mahant\(^1\) of Kanak Bhawan in Ayodhya had been my father’s classmate at Forbes's Inter College in Faizabad. They were the best of friends and we would be received by him with much warmth.

\(^1\) Chief priest
My grandparents house in Faizabad was on the outskirts of the Faizabad city and was on the Parikrama Road on the route of the annual Parikrama (Paikarma in local Awadhi dialect). Sometimes when we went to Faizabad in time for paikarma, I would be witness to the grand spectacle of people undertaking the arduous journey to affirm their faith, and people who would provide water and refreshments to the faithful. Barely a preschooler, I was spellbound by it and it was difficult for my parents to bring me into the house at meal times. My father would recite the story of Ram and connect to it all the places we visited in Ayodhya and all the festivals that I saw. I do not remember anyone pointing out to me at Ayodhya where Lord Ram was born or any reference being made by anyone of Babri Masjid during this time.

In Delhi, my family lived in rented ground floor of a house on a narrow street in Ahata Kedara, Bara Hindu Rao in the part of the city commonly known as Delhi-6 (refering to the postal pin code of the area). The street was closed from one end by a house that did not have a door on the street and had five houses on each side. Among our neighbours two of the families were Muslim badhai. The men were daily wage or odd jobs workers who took their bag of tools every morning and went looking for work. One family belonged to the caste Saqqa – the head of the family was a bhishti who was employed by the MCD to pour water from a goat skin bag slung over his shoulder in cleaned-out open drains in the locality every morning. I remember now that they were quite poor. Another family was Qureishi and they were economically very well off compared to any other household on the street. The rest of the families, including our landlord, were Hindu Punjabis who had migrated from Lahore to Delhi during partition. All the men were autorickshaw drivers except our landlord, who owned a small workshop where he made rings out of molten tin which were used by

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2 Parikrama – also called Chauda Kosi Parikrama is an annual festival that involves thousands of faithful making circumambulation on a fourteen kos route ending in Ayodhya, symbolising the fourteen years Lord Rama spent in exile and his arrival in Ayodhya at the end of the exile. The route passes through many neighbourhoods of the twin cities of Faizabad and Ayodhya.

3 Badhai – Carpenter (also a caste name)

4 Saqqa – A caste name. Saqqa and Badhai are both now recognised as OBCs

5 Bhishti – is a synonymous word for saqqa caste and literally refers to a traditional water carriers
qalaiwalla to tin-coat copper utensils. Our family was the only tenant family on the street- all the others owned the houses they lived in. While in the everyday generally everyone got along without any major schism on religion, caste or class lines being felt, the Hindus were not particularly close to the other Muslim families as they were with my family. My father ran a small private school in the area and was called Masterji respectfully by everyone in the locality. Our family was also the only family on the street that subscribed to daily newspapers and periodicals. Any leisure time was spent reading. Both my parents did not wear their religion- both literally and figuratively. My father always wore white trousers and shirt in public, strictly never appearing in kurta-pajama or any informal clothes in public. My mother, being from Gorakhpur, would wear saris with an ease that a Delhi Muslim woman would not. More than anything else their outward appearance and their education set my parents apart from other Muslims on the street.

The fact that our landlord’s family was Punjabi also influenced my family’s lifestyle to a great extent. My mother was a stickler for cleanliness and had flair for cooking. She was forced to become quite independent in managing the household responsibilities and shopping etc primarily because my father took no interest and refused to share any responsibility in the same beyond earning money. She later recounted to me that she had to go out to market etc alone so frequently that she told my father that observing pardah by only wearing a burqa in these circumstances made no sense to her and she had stopped wearing burqa even before I was born. My mother was accepted into the Sanjha chulha of the Punjabi families and she learnt how to make stuffed paranthas. When I look back now I think my mother invested a lot of energy in being accepted into what may have seemed like a superior culture to her.

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6 Qalai wallah – vendors who used to travel the city streets with small portable kilns offering services to qalai utensils. Qalai means to polish brass and copper utensils with tin to give it a protective layer and silvery sheen. This polish would wear off with use and had to be regularly done to keep the utensils safe.

7 Purdah – often the word purdah in actual usage does not only refer to a garment but to a value. In this case, my mother was referring to her mobility in the domains that women ‘of class’ were supposed to be secluded from in those days, like shopping for daily groceries.

8 Burqa – a outer full length coat-like garment that covers the entire body with a head peace that covers the face too.

9 A shared oven in which women from same neighbourhood would together bake rotis, making cooking also a community event. The mud coating of the oven and fuel wood was taken care of.
I had an idyllic childhood mostly comprised of reading story books and children’s periodicals at home and roaming the streets sometimes with my friends. We would play inside the Shahi Idgah. Among our regular rounds was also a small Gurudwara off the Chamelian Road towards Qasabpura. We would go unknown to the parents, the bunch of my friends, Muslim-Hindu, Punjabi-Dilliwalas, poor and dirty-clean and combed, to the gurudwara and prostrate (*mattha tek*) to Guru Granth Sahib and happily line up for our share of *prasad* (ritual offerings). I already understood Punjabi and Awadhi well and could understand some parts of the *paath* - the recitation of verses from the holy Granth sahib.

Our family friend and a teacher in my father’s school used to live in a house in a neighbouring locality – Beri Wallah Bagh. The Maliks were a Punjabi Hindu family that came to Delhi during the partition of India and occupied this house which was earlier owned by a Muslim family that migrated to Pakistan around the same time. I often stayed overnight in the house which had a large courtyard. The rooms had tiled floors and walls. The topmost portions of the walls had lot of ornamental floral work on it and also verses from Quran. During the annual whitewash and painting in the house the Maliks would get the verses painted carefully and preserved the house more or less as they found it.
And, thus, I lived in a Delhi neighbourhood where people had to iron out the creases of the differences—thath undeniably existed among them. This is not to say that there was bonhomie between all kinds of people but as an adult now I feel that thirty years ago in Delhi even though prejudice was always palpable and it often was expressed in overt discrimination, occasionally erupting in violent episodes, it was not easy to overlook or ‘unsee’ the other. The class, caste, communal divides often existed within a localised community, and people had to confront them and negotiate with them in their everyday lives. In Delhi today, the spatial segregation has reached a point where we no longer have to engage with the differences. This choice not to engage and the degree of its availability is a function of position of privilege and class (which conflates with religious and caste identities) of the person. The more privileged you are, the easier it is to shut out and forget that other less-privileged people also exist. The more affluent never have to go into the working class neighbourhoods, slums or segregated Muslim enclaves and confront the differences unless they wish to— for research, fieldwork or seeking exotic culinary experiences. While the people on the other side of the affluence divide—providing services to the affluent, work in their homes and businesses, have to traverse the boundary everyday and can see the differences clearly. But in order that their wares and services are saleable, increasingly they are required to leave behind or obscure the tell-tale signs of who they are when they meet their employers such that even here the powerful are not confronted by the difference. An everyday critical engagement is neither a requirement nor a necessity anymore.

As a result of living in this diverse milieu one of the things that happened with help from my father, was that we would compare and contrast religions and cultures. Just as witnessing Paikarma was the beginning of my acquaintance with Ramayana. My gurudwara visits served as an opportunity for him to introduce me to Sikhism. I will not go into all the details but this included a confrontation of relationship of Sufi Islam and Guru Nanak, and also Aurangzeb and militant Sikhism. When Operation Blue Star took place our landlord’s (who had since sold their house to us and moved to Jheel Khurenji in Trans-Yamuna) daughter had recently been married into a family in Amritsar. The operation was a source of great anxiety in my family. Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984 and the following massacre of Sikhs in Delhi were a turning point for me in my understanding of communal relations. The massacre was my first
acquaintance with the ‘language of violence’ which is often presented the only way in which ‘negotiation of differences’ between human beings and communities can take place. I witnessed the Hindu youth in the locality bring things looted from Sikh houses and businesses and listened to the stories of people being burnt alive. Sometimes these stories included accounts of Muslims saving the Sikhs from Hindus by hiding them in their houses and numerous reminiscences of partition in hushed tones. I also remember discussions among Muslims regarding how the enemy-friend configurations have changed in the present situation with comparison to the partition. I experienced a curfew first time as an eight year old. When I went back to the school the first day after the violence I saw burnt tyres strewn across the roads, the looted and destroyed shops, and the gurudwara near Bara Hindu Rao completely gutted down. This was the first time that partition of India became real to me. I comprehended that partition was not just cutting a country into two like a cake. And that the business of being a Hindu, Muslim, Punjabi, Sikh did not stop at being culturally different. When the Khalistan movement was at its peak and each Sikh was looked at as a terrorist or a potential terrorist, issues of ‘separatism’ and ‘loyalty’ became very clear to me. None of this needed any explanation from my father- living in Delhi during the time was education enough.

By this time my father’s school ran in Beriwallah Bagh house of the Maliks who wanted to sell the house. We had to vacate the premises and my father moved his little school to our house in Ahata Kedara and moved his family to a rented house in Zakir Nagar in what was then known as Okhla Village. It took about an hour and a half of bus journey between Bara Hindu Rao and Okhla. My father chose to move to Okhla because he said we could all go to University in Jamia, the residents of the area were all the teachers of the Jamia, Fatehpuri School and the Anglo-Arabic School. Many teachers employed in government schools also lived there. In fact, he had been introduced to the place by family friends who were teachers. The wife was a teacher in my father’s school and her husband used to teach in Shafiq Memorial School.

For a child my age Zakir Nagar, Okhla was a place full of opportunities for adventurous forays. From the balcony of our first floor house we could see the sky far into the horizon on three sides (leaving the side which has New Friends Colony), and almost
the entire length of, what is now the Zakir Nagar main road. The river Yamuna was a short walk from our house and often my three year old brother and I would go to play on the banks of Yamuna. Later, we would also play a lot on the plot where my parents began building their house and my mother supervised all the construction in her free time. Every day in the evening, my father would sit with the mason and some experienced labourers and take stock of the work done and plan ahead. He designed the layout of the house himself and would often draw and redraw maps. Sometimes the redrawing meant that he would have to get a wall or two knocked down and built elsewhere. In fact, maps and globes were a fascination with him which he transmitted to me. When I studied or discussed history or reflected on international news, I had an image of the country/place from the map in my mind.

It is at this age that I remember arguing with my father about who was to blame for India’s partition. I was very patriotic and would take the simple position that Jinnah was. While my father used to take the position that Jinnah was afraid that Muslims would not be treated fairly in the Independent India and if only Jawaharlal Nehru had taken troubles to allay this insecurity India would not have been partition. None of us would budge from our position. When Babri Majid was demolished and riots ensued in the country I reflected on my position and felt as if I had been personally betrayed by my country into losing this argument with my father.

In Zakir Nagar we would buy our monthly groceries from a shop run by a bania popularly called Lalaji by everyone. Even though there were a couple of shops run by Muslim boys who used to travel daily from Jama Masjid, Lalaji’s shop got most business because only he extended credit to people. For the salaried class it came in handy to take what was needed and pay Lalaji when the salary came. By this time my father had finished his LLB and in Zakir Nagar most people called him Vakil Sahab. Lalaji would often come to our house to seek my father’s council for suing people who had not paid money due to him in time. He complained bitterly about some people who always said ‘Insha Allah’ (God willing) but never paid-up on time. Lalaji never sued anyone but his client-lawyer relationship with my father was only a ruse for the ease in their friendship transcending the communal divide while constantly invoking it.
While in Zakir Nagar my father became active in politics once again (he has been a sympathiser of the CPI many years earlier and was an active worker during the emergency). He joined Forward Block and even contested Lok Sabha elections from the Chandni Chowk seat. He would often take us to Party office in Lutyen’s Delhi and Netaji’s (for that is what he always reverentially called Subhash Chandra Bose) Indian National Army office at Daryaganj. Many get-togethers and informal meetings were organised at our house too. After he passed his LLB final exams and began what remained through his life an amateurish practice of law my father found his niche at Tis Hazari Courts assisting a Sikh Lawyer whose success in practice was inversely proportional to his passion for matters related to law and justice. But one of the side effects of this legal move in my father’s life was to enroll me in Baptist Mission Gange Girls School at Raj Niwas Road near Civil Lines because according to him “daughters of all the lawyers study there…”. From having studied in local schools in Bara Hindu Rao and Okhla where there were a sizeable number of Muslim children I found myself the only Muslim girl in the entire school. Of course, this proved rich ground for my father and me to embark on a comparative exploration of Christianity and Islam but more than that this move assumed significance because it was the beginning of the nineties.

Rath Yatra by LK Advani and the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi debate shot to front in the mainstream discourse in the beginning of the decade of nineties. The image of Muslims as aggressors seemed to prepare ‘legitimate’ ground for their brutal victimisation. It was also around the same time that Anti-Mandal protests were sparked. Returning home from school in an autorickshaw, twice, I witnessed a sea of college students on the road to ITO crossing from the Ring road flyover protesting the implementation of Mandal recommendations. Studying at the Jamia my brother was part of the left students group – AISF that was pro-reservations. At home I heard a debate on both the issues which was very different from the mainstream and belligerent discourse. It seemed to me as a teenager very unreasonable that these protesting youth did not want a fair chance to progress also being available to those oppressed for centuries by the caste system. And then, it did not seem so surprising that the same society, where these kinds of loud protest arose against social justice, was demonising and perpetrating violence against Muslims for no fault of theirs. Both the matters read
together in our household made for a coherent discourse of the mainstream— it was clear to me that people were just being their unreasonable selves. But in the school, clearly on both the issues my perspective was different from everyone else. Needless to say it put me in an immensely awkward situation in school— for my friends I was that freak case- the girl who was known to the entire school for being Muslim and then she supported reservations!

A particular incident was my striking but late introduction to RSS. I went with my elder brother to visit a school friend who lived in Wazirabad. When we reached the street I saw my friend’s father standing in front of the house in shorts. On seeing us he abruptly turned and ran into the house. When we reached the house he was wearing a pajama. After the visit was over and we left the house, I laughingly spoke to my brother of how the man was embarrassed and had run to change into pajama. My elder brother in a very somber tone told me that I had not understood the situation rightly that my friend’s father was a “sanghi in khaki knickers” and further qualified the description of RSS as the people who had murdered Gandhi.

I joined Jamia Millia Islamia to pursue my bachelor degree in Mathematics. My interest and aptitude for mathematics notwithstanding, I discovered the literature section of the well stocked Dr Zakir Hussain Library of the Jamia. My father had a bachelor’s degree in English literature and I had read many classic writers like Charles Dickens and Jane Austin etc but now the world of contemporary literature seemed to beacon me. I read voraciously for all the three years of my undergraduate studies. Picking up an author and sometimes reading all their works available in the library- AS Byatt, VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer. I happened to chance upon the autobiography of Simone de Beauvoir and then became obsessed with ‘the existentialists group’ – by Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus. My acquaintance with Feminism began here too having read de Beauvoir’s Second Sex and then chancing upon an anthology of Urdu poems by Pakistani feminists. I read a lot of the contemporary African-American authors like Langston Hughes and Toni Morrison and I also read Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of America. This made me much interested in various injustices across time and societies. The long and short of this was that I lost all interest in Mathematics. My father was furious but as an alternative suggested studying Law to follow in his footsteps. The controversy regarding Jamia’s
then Pro-Vice Chancellor Mushirul Hasan’s stance on banning of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses and subsequent campus vandalism resulted in *sine die* at the Jamia. This impacted my career choice in a manner I have not regretted since then. I found out about Social Work and decided to become a Social Worker.

Social work curriculum being taught at Jamia’s Department of Social Work offered me a chance to specialise in Social Development which at that time lay a lot of emphasis on rural development. The prevailing discourses in development sector at the time labored under the unquestioned assumption that ‘the urban’ was already developed. I began work with PRADAN in newly formed district Dausa in Rajasthan but found living in a rural area extremely difficult. I came back to Delhi within a couple of months armed with a scathing critique of micro-credit as an approach to development. My only experience of being denied a rented accommodation because I was a Muslim took place in Dausa and also one of senior team members sarcastically commented on my leaving that maybe I wasn’t interested in working because ‘you people get money from the gulf’. In Delhi, I continued in my work to engage with rural poverty and grassroots groups travelling frequently to remote areas in many parts of the country, and it took me several years to become aware and sensitive to the full import of issues related to urban poverty and marginalisation. My introduction to issues of urban poverty in Delhi was to be in engagement with the most destitute of the city’s poor- its homeless. In my off and on engagement with a shelter rights group in Delhi I became deeply aware and concerned about the issues. It was the beginning of my foray into understanding the structural causes that impacted the working class, especially the unorganised sector workers. As documentation professional I delved into the issues of construction workers, domestic workers, and development oustees. I worked with organisations and groups who engaged on these issues understanding how they respond to the everyday realities of the people while they also learn to grapple and deal with structural issues and circumstances. As a Social Work educator I extended my area of interest to street children who are arguably the most destitute, powerless and exploited part of the urban population.

This interest came a full circle for me as a Social Work educator when one of my field work supervisees shared with me her observations regarding street children in Delhi.
She said that almost all the street children she met in her fieldwork were Muslims and that those who were not Muslims were Dalits. According to her the trend was so strong that it is a wonder that nobody had wondered whether so many of these children were poor and on streets because they were Muslims. She asked me why no one had stopped to wonder the reason for complete absence of Sikh or Christian children among the street children. Her observation in a way echoed my own but I too was afraid to imagine this as a sociological observation. She was right in being flabbergasted at the academic and development professional community showing a total lack of sociological imagination. One reason was, clearly that those who worked with the poorest and most marginalised among the city dwellers were reluctant to engage in the questions of caste or religious identities. What is the logic of avoiding these, clearly uncomfortable, questions?

For me after this learning interaction with my student the deeper question became, “what are the purposes and consequences of the clear division of labour between those who study class and those who study identity?”. Possibly these divisions may make sense to those who study human lives within disciplinary boundaries drawn tightly and claim to work for ‘scientific’ purposes of advancing knowledge. For a Social Worker, an adherence to these boundaries may mean compartmentalising human life in a manner that is alienating and can never lead to emancipatory engagement.

The concern for studying the questions of identity and discrimination across the realm of individual-psychological factors and those of structural, political-economic factors led me conceptualise this work in the way that I have charted out in the methodology chapter earlier in this thesis. In the chapters that follow I lay out my explorations and analysis in greater detail and hopefully in a manner that does not fragment and fetishise various parts of life as ‘a given’. If anything, the analysis would illuminate various processes that impact the consciousness of ‘city-zens’, and produce a geography marked by prejudice, discrimination and oppression. These geographies are habituated and read by people differently depending on their positionality in the social, economic and political structures of dominance. Discourses that these competing ‘readings’ give rise to have power of being transmitted and understood by the society proportional to the strength and power possessed by the people who are producing these discourses.
Obviously so, as Karl Marx asserted, the ruling ideas of a time are the ideas of those who are in power. He alerts us to the pitfall of the understanding in which ‘we detach the ideas of the ruling class from the ruling class itself and attribute to them an independent existence, if we confine ourselves to saying that these or those ideas were dominant at a given time, without bothering ourselves about the conditions of production and the producers of those ideas’ (1976, p 60). The dominant and hegemonic discourses on various counts are analysed in the next chapters of the thesis with this in mind and also with an acute recognition of the fact that even the language and tone of this work has been made available by the changing nature of the relationships of production and hence those of dominance.