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Gendering the everyday state: Muslim women, claim-making & brokerage in India

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic article focuses on interactions between poor Muslim women, various intermediaries/brokers, and the Indian state. The article illustrates the complexities of claim-making and the forms of subjugation/marginalisation Muslim women experience when attempting to access resources, documents or paperwork. Contrary, however, to many representations of Muslim women's engagements with the state, we also draw out agentive aspects as women hustle and negotiate to make claims and assert citizenship rights. Outcomes are variegated but also incorporate some women in brokerage roles, challenging assumptions regarding state/people mediation in India which foregrounds male brokers. The empirical detail is situated in a theoretical context incorporating gendered distinctions between shifting imaginaries of 'nation' and lived experiences of the 'everyday state'. In a context where 'nation' has been evoked and articulated as a feminine form – through evocations of *mata* (mother) – we show how shifts towards a masculine imaginary, symbolised within Hindu-nationalist discourses, impacts Muslim women's subjective experiences. We also illustrate that, whilst gendered imaginaries of 'the nation' are shifting, the 'everyday state' has long been experienced as a masculinised formation. Here we show how embodied involvements with the everyday state were constituted through gendered bureaucratic histories, spatial configurations, urban cosmologies and broader ideologies.

KEYWORDS
Brokerage; state; India; Muslim women; gender

In May of 2015, Zahoor[1] asked me to join her on a trip from the Muslim mohallas (neighbourhoods) in the north of the city of Saharanpur to the government offices in the south. Zahoor had spent two years – since her husband's death – attempting to obtain a widow's payment of ₹20,000 (around £200) through the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS). The trip would involve negotiating summer heat and transportation challenges, but also the navigation of lines of communal demarcation and expectations around Muslim women's engagements with public spaces. Donning her burqa, Zahoor laughed and declared 'Tom bhai, you are a foreigner so maybe you can make them [the government officials] listen. When they see our [Muslim] name and our burqa, then they will never do this work for us'. Zahoor's son, 17-year-old Faisal, joined us, and together we clambered into a crowded electric rickshaw. As Masjids (mosques), minarets and petty commodity producing manufactories gave way to more affluent middle-class neighbourhoods in the south, we changed our auto for the third time to complete our journey to the issuing office.

The office, located in a single-storey colonial era building with an attached, larger, more modern annexe, already had a line of claimants snaking out of the door into the heat of the courtyard. It was an hour before we heaved a

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sigh of relief as we crossed the building's threshold into its cooler interior. Over the next half hour, we inched down a corridor and into the main office. Here, Zahoor presented her documents to the official. With his head never lifting from the ledger in front of him, he made a cursory glance before declaring – in a disinterested voice – 'You must give evidence for this claim, where is the death certificate!'. Zahoor responded that it was in his hand, together with the application and other documents. 'No, no'! 'I must also have proof that you are the head of household … you must bring this'. Zahoor looked despairingly at me. In my politest Hindi I pleaded that he consider the case. There was no change in his demeanour, however, and he waved the documents vaguely in Zahoor's direction until she took them from his grasp.[2]

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Drawing on fieldwork conducted in the North Indian city of Saharanpur and earlier contextual research (see: Chambers 2018; Chambers and Ansari 2018; Chambers 2019, 2020a, 2020b), this article details the complexities, forms of subjugation and degrees of marginalisation experienced by poorer Muslim women as they attempt to access state resources.[3] The article emphasises how differentiated engagements with the state are intersected by factors including socio-economic position, personal biographies, class, marital status and life stage. It also attends to agentive and performative activities as women hustle and negotiate with various state actors and intermediaries. In so doing we make three empirical arguments. Firstly, that the absence of literature detailing Muslim women's bottom-up expressions of citizenship has invisibilised a significant section of the Indian population. Secondly, that whilst Muslim women in India have to negotiate highly gendered considerations – both in terms of their own community and at sites of interaction with the state – the image of the passive citizen that often perpetuates public discourse is an inherently problematic and homogenising representation. Finally, we challenge assumptions in much existing literature on state/citizen forms of brokerage in India which foregrounds male brokers operating through male-dominated networks and includes no details of Muslim women in brokerage roles.

At a theoretical level, the article elucidates gendered distinctions between imaginaries of 'nation' and the gendering of the 'everyday state'. Here, again, we outline three primary contributions. Firstly, in a context where 'nation' has been evoked and articulated as a feminine form through evocations of *mata* (mother) – and supposed characteristics of care, nurture, chastity etc. (Silva 2004) – we show how shifts towards a more masculine imaginary, bound up within Hindu-nationalist discourses, impacted Muslim women's subjective experiences and created ambiguities in gendered evocations of 'the nation'. Secondly, we illustrate that, whilst gendered imaginaries of 'the nation' are shifting, the 'everyday state' has long been experienced as a masculinised formation, a consideration only tacitly attended to in prior literature. Here we show how embodied involvements with the everyday state were constituted through gendered bureaucratic histories, spatial configurations, urban cosmologies and broader ideologies. Finally, we detail occasions where women actively disrupted gendered norms of the everyday state through a subversion of a normative position that located them as 'out of place' in sites of state interaction. This tactic, in some cases, not only disrupted norms of behaviour but instilled a sense of shock, even fear, in state officials that enabled Mulsim women to push for access to resources for themselves or – in roles of brokerage – on behalf of others.

The data presented in this article are drawn from a variety of methods. Participant observation, such as that detailed in the opening vignette, frequently involved spending time with individuals during attempts at claim-making. This is supplemented by selected material from 66 ethnographic interviews, and additional informal discussions, with women and men from across the city. In the case of both interview data and participatory description, some were the result of one-off interactions but other material involved interlocutors with whom the authors had long-established relationships.

The gendered state: from the nation to the everyday

Silva (2004) has explored the construction of gendered nations across South Asia. For Silva, South Asian nations, including India, are imagined along feminine lines. Thus, India becomes *mata*

(mother) and takes on a character embodying care and maternal qualities but also a purity, chastity and piety which must be protected. The work of defending the nation becomes, for Silva, a masculine role, reinforcing deeper gender ideologies which regard the piety and honour of women as residing under the guardianship of men. Perhaps, the most potent signifier of the gendered form of the nation is the evocation of India as a goddess, personified in the image of 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India). Whilst her form has altered over time – including being merged, in the 1970s & 80s, with the image of Indira Gandhi (Ramaswamy 2010) – the evocation of 'Bharat Mata' remains a potent and affective symbol which is regularly cited to conjure a sense of national belonging (cf. Banerjee 2017; Mookherjee 2011).

It is the positioning of Indira Gandhi as 'mother of the nation' that provides the background for Tarlo's (2003) analysis of documentation charting resettlement and sterilisation programmes during the state of emergency (1975–1977). Here, Tarlo details the array of brokers, middlewomen/men, petty bureaucrats and documents that mediated between the state and citizens. Significant in Tarlo's monograph is the tacit segregation between the 'everyday state' and 'the nation'. Blame for the injustices of sterilisation and resettlement programmes was focused on local bureaucrats and officials, thus protecting citizens' imaginaries of the purity of the nation along with Indira Gandhi's administration and her position of 'mother of the nation'. These threads of distinction between 'nation' and 'everyday state' have been traced in other research on India. Drawing on Inden's (1995) earlier work, Corbridge et al. (2005) have argued that grandiose discourses of nation-building were often rejected at the local political level, instead suggesting that the Indian state is often 'seen' and 'imagined' through everyday encounters with anti-poverty and other programmes. This work feeds into broader research which has shown distinctions between the 'everyday state' – as experienced through interactions with government offices, bureaucrats and documents – and 'nation' as an abstract imaginary cultivated through symbolic and affective markers (cf. Scott 1998; Hull 2012; Mathur 2016; Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019; Kikon 2019).

In segregating 'nation' and 'everyday state', we situate the theoretical contribution of this article within a framework that genders the perceived divide. Here, our ethnographic data illustrates that, whilst historically imaginaries of 'nation' have tended toward a feminised construct, this is shifting in the contemporary context. The everyday state, in contrast, has long been experienced and articulated in masculine terms. This, however, is not a binary with many overlaps and ambiguities between 'nation' and 'everyday state'. Nor are gendered symbolisms fixed. Nations and states undergo constant processes of making and remaking (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Kaur 2020). India, for example, has seen various reconfigurations in the aesthetic, symbolic and discursive practices that produce imaginaries of the nation's persona. Of late, for example, masculinising language and affects have foregrounded high-tech, entrepreneurial and assertive associations bound into neoliberal aesthetics of 'self-made' manhood and the authoritarian power of right-wing nationalist politics (cf. Kaur 2020; Kinnvall 2019; Gooptu 2013).

Yet *Mata* is not dead and the state remains the primary site for claim-making for citizens of various backgrounds. Nor – with some exceptions – are individuals truly agentless in their enactments of citizenship. Citizenship is often a multidirectional process in which citizens are made not only through the top-down actions of states but also via engagements in agentive processes of self-making that configure citizenship from the bottom up (Ong 2006; Lazar and Nuijten 2013; Kamra 2021). Ethnographic research has also illustrated the ambiguities of work undertaken by low-level bureaucrats, officials and politicians, who respond to top-down pressure but also the demands of local populaces (cf. Corbridge et al. 2005; Rao 2018; Chaudhuri 2019; Chambers 2020b). In this context, we illustrate how women from Saharanpur's Muslim *mohallas* enacted active expressions of citizenship and we also detail how, in some cases, these enactments led to wholesale transformations in the subjectivities of women themselves (see the later story of Razda, in particular).

Of course, gendered dimensions of citizenship are variously attended to in previous literatures. Less considered, however, is the imagined and materially constituted gendered construction of the state itself (at both the level of 'nation' and 'everyday'). Whilst some prior literature has attended

to the 'gendered nation', the 'everyday state' in India has not been explored in these terms. Thus, we show how the self-making engaged in by local women was also cast within the context of a masculinised everyday state *and* against the background of more ambivalent imaginaries of the gendered nation with both being inflected through discriminatory and marginalising forces that have increasingly impacted the country's Muslim minority (cf. Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012) and produced degrees of graduated citizenship (Ong 2006; Chambers 2020a).

Mata & Modi: conjuring the 'nation' in the *Mohalla*

> Muslims are meant to have lots of facilities in the Indian constitution but in reality, we get nothing. Now it is even worse because the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] is in power. They never want to do anything for Muslims. Not the UP government nor the BJP, they never work for Muslims or for the poor. The BJP ignore Muslims and Yogi [Yogi Adityanath – UP's Chief Minister] says we should not stay here. Modi [Narendra Modi, India's Prime Minister] is also making many attacks on us. *Lekin ham bhārat ke bachche bhī hain* [but we are also India's children]. (Nasreen – A *mohalla* resident, 2018)

Hostility from intensifying right-wing, nationalist, anti-Muslim rhetoric had inevitably impacted how the relationship between nation and citizen was imagined in the *mohallas*. With rhetoric often spilling over into violence – either perpetuated by the state or with the tacit approval of the state – a subjective sense of marginalisation had intensified within the local Muslim populace (Chambers 2020a). Yet the nurturing state, embodied in constructions of Mata, still remained present in the narratives of Nasreen and others. This ambivalence (cf. Kamra 2021) cut through many articulations of 'the nation' expressed by residents in the *mohallas*. For Muslim women, in particular, the rise of a muscular (and masculinised) Hindu nationalism (cf. Banerjee 2017) had not only intensified a sense of marginalisation configured around membership of an ostracised minority but had also increased feelings of gendered exclusion.

In her recent book, *Brand New Nation*, Ravinder Kaur (2020) traces the (re)branding of India on the world stage. Countering narratives that have foregrounded the decline of the nation-state, Kaur outlines how India (like many other nations) has actively commodified itself within global markets to attract investment. However, she also details appeals made to Indian citizens, primarily the middle-classes, to be active investors in the nation through the enactment of future-orientated entrepreneurial subjectivities. This, Kaur contends, has shifted conceptions of the relationship between 'citizens' and 'nation' from one based on ideals of love and sacrifice towards a more instrumental 'investor-citizenship' where returns are expected. Yet, for many minorities – Muslims in particular – little space is afforded within this new imaginary and, when it is, minority presences are only validated when they fit within an entrepreneurial ideal. Even here, though, Kaur illustrates how the rise of Hindu nationalism has further pushed Muslims and other minorities to the fringes of affectively evoked imaginaries of 'the nation'.

Whilst a masculinising of Indian nationhood is broadly constructed (Banerjee 2017), gendered dimensions of these ongoing transformations are intimately bound up with the charismatic figure of India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. As with the merging of Indira Gandhi and Bharat Mata in the 1970s and 80s (Ramaswamy 2010), so Modi's campaign for re-election as Chief Minister of Gujarat – following the violent anti-Muslim pogroms of 2002 – saw him evoked – within campaign material, media and elsewhere – as the state's *asmiti* (self/ego/pride) (Kaur 2020, 247). Since his national election victories of 2014 and 2019, with the BJP, it is the combination of neoliberal capitalist development, Hindu-nationalist rhetoric, and Modi's positioning as a self-made strongman that have underpinned the aesthetic and affective constitution of his administration (Mankekar 2015; Kaur 2020; Chambers 2020a).

It was, then, the consequences of these affective shifts that underpinned Nasreen's articulated sense of marginalisation. For Nasreen, this went beyond the material impacts of intensifying hostility towards India's Muslims and extended to a sense of familial betrayal and mourning for the lost nurturing imaginary conjured in evocations of Bharat Mata. After completing the interview, Thomas

stayed on for supper with the family, an invitation that was extended as a result of a long friendship with relatives of Nasreen. Afterwards, whilst taking tea, she reflected '*āj kal India hamko pyār nahin detā hai*' (these days India no longer loves us). The ideal of an entrepreneurial 'investor-citizen' (Kaur 2020) may have offered an agentive positionality for India's upwardly mobile middle-class but for women of Saharanpur's Muslim *mohallas* there was often little scope for expressions of agentive citizenship to be found in this emerging imaginary.

Nasreen's story not only foregrounds a personal narrative but begins the process of illuminating Muslim women's experiences with, and imaginaries of, the state; an area that remains conspicuously unexplored (for exceptions see: Hasan 2018; Williams 2015; Kirmani 2016). In part, this lack of data are tied to a perceived absence of Muslim women from public space and politics. Whilst practices of *purdah* (veiling) and female seclusion restrict physical presence, degrees of corporeal absence do not necessarily imply a lack of involvement in the construction of imaginaries and materialities that constitute the making of spaces, politics and economies beyond the domestic context (cf. Jeffery 1979; Williams 2015; Hasan 2018). Whilst broader processes of nation-making were significant in shaping subjective relationships with the state, at the level of the everyday – as is the case for many from poor and marginalised groups across the country (Tarlo 2003; Corbridge et al. 2005; Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019) – the state was often experienced by the *mohalla's* female residents not through large-scale affective renderings but via the nitty-gritty of government offices and bureaucratic processes.

It also involved the negotiation of distinct cartographies. In Saharanpur, the offices and symbols of the state are located primarily in wealthier, Hindu-dominated neighbourhoods (cf. Chambers 2019; Chambers 2020a). Muslim women often described how crossing imagined urban borders intersected with their female Muslim identity (cf. Chambers 2019). A *burqa*, for example, was a sign of respect in the *mohallas* but when spatial divisions of religion and class were crossed, the *burqa's* symbolic meaning was transformed from one of piety to one of suspicion. Specifically, women suggested, the wearer was often seen as a potential *chor* (thief) by residents of these more affluent neighbourhoods.

These experiences also became bound up with the gendered constitution of many government offices and other sites of mediation. As Zahoor, whose narrative opened this article, later reflected:

> … there are some women in those offices but mostly it is men. They make us lift our veil and don't understand our culture. They can't even spell our [Muslim] names and often treat us like we don't understand any of the things. But we know that the government has promised these things [welfare, etc.] so why are they not giving it?

If imaginaries of 'the nation' were beginning to take on a more masculine form, then the overlapping realms of the everyday state had long been inherently masculine in their spatial and material formations. Before turning to how this was negotiated by Muslim women in Saharanpur there is, therefore, a need to understand how this gendered history becomes embedded in bureaucratic materialities. We also use the following section to introduce the reader to the schemes and programmes that feature later in the article.

India, PDS & state bureaucracies: a gendered history

India's Public Distribution System (PDS),[4] and its associated bureaucratic assemblages, are labyrinthine, often uneven, suffer ongoing issues of access and leakage, and (by some accounts) conceal deeper structures of exploitation (Drèze and Khera 2015; Jayal 2019; Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019). Despite ongoing reconfigurations, the everyday experiences of the state's welfare, anti-poverty and development programmes are often constituted in relative continuity. For the majority of Indians, particularly marginalised groups, access involves various human and non-human intermediaries, long periods of waiting, form filling and to-and-fro trips to offices (Gupta 1995; Williams 2011; Chaudhuri 2019; Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019; Chambers

2020b; Carswell and De Neve 2020). In 2009, the Indian government launched its biometric Aadhaar Card[5] scheme which was intended to improve and secure identity provision. However, it has been criticised for creating and maintaining forms of exclusion and marginalisation (Drèze et al. 2017; Jayal 2019; Chambers 2020b; Carswell and De Neve 2021) or furthering corporate interests (Chaudhuri and König 2018; Chambers 2020b; Dattani 2020).

Whilst the Aadhaar card features in this article, the primary focus is on older schemes that continue to operate alongside it. Amongst these is the Ration Card, which provides the backbone of the country's PDS provisioning. Since independence, changes and alterations to the system have been numerous, but of particular significance was the 1952 switch from individual to familial-based issuing which had the effect of foregrounding 'family' over 'individual' and situated male 'heads of households' as the primary mediator of in-household ration distribution. As Tarangini Sriraman (2018) argues, ' … the bureaucratic imagination of the state […] has definitely perpetuated the household as a unit of enumeration [… subsuming] individual identity within [the] family' (xxxiv). It also reproduced broader patriarchal structures by naming the (almost always) male 'head of household' as the primary card holder. Thus, the gendering of the everyday state is not limited to physical spaces (government office etc.) but is also bound up in the materialities of programmes and documents. This historical construction of PDS had complex implications for women in Saharanpur. In cases of divorce or estrangement, for example, obtaining a new card independent of the former marital household required the latter's cooperation and could, therefore, be blocked.

In September 2013, the ruling Congress-led coalition instituted the National Food Security Act (NFSA). The act brought in a raft of changes to provisioning of PDS, extended entitlement and emphasised women's empowerment (for critiques see: Drèze et al. 2018; Pradhan and Rao 2018). Amongst the legislation inaugurated within the NFSA, Section 13 mandated a woman be listed as 'head of household' for the issuing of new ration cards (The Gazette of India 2013). With many cards pre-dating this change, however, male 'heads of household' often remain the named holders. Even when altered, persisting family-level issuance means that ration cards continue to be embedded in familial politics and local power relations (Pradhan and Rao 2018).

The final welfare schemes that feature in this article are the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS) and the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS). Both are orchestrated through the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) which was instituted in 1995 by the Ministry of Rural Development. The NFBS provides a one-off cash transfer of ₹20,000 (around £200) to Below Poverty Line (BPL) households upon the death of a primary breadwinner (Biswas 2017). The IGNWPS is likewise administered through the NSAP for BPL recipients. The IGNWPS issues ₹300 (around £3) monthly for widows aged between 40 and 79.[6] However, with the identification of beneficiaries devolved to *Gram Panchayats* (village councils) and municipalities, access remains sporadic and embedded in the social and political connections (cf. Mishra and Kar 2017). We return to widows' schemes later in the article and turn first to the issuing of Ration Cards to female heads of household.

Ration cards: mediating women's engagements with the everyday state

The aforementioned absence of Muslim women in literature regarding people/state relations in India not only reinforces assumptions of passivity but also ignores interplays between state policy and religious ideology in the reproduction of patriarchal relations within India's Muslim minority. As Zoya Hasan (2018) indicates, understanding these entanglements – vis-à-vis Muslim women's interactions with and imaginaries of the state – requires a concurrent engagement with 'state' and 'community'. For Muslim women from Saharanpur's *mohallas*, engagements with the state played out in a context where both the state and social expectations of neighbourhood and community called such activities into question.

Mehboob, 45, described himself as a social worker with the Afsar Education & Welfare Society. Founded by upwardly mobile men from Saharanpur's Muslim *mohallas,* the group provided advocacy around PDS and ID. Mehboob was reticent about the NFSA changes:

> … I do not agree. Our new generation are going to study, but many families have women who stay at home. Many Muslim women are not bold and have hesitation to go outside. This new law makes difficulties for them. Many Muslims do not like to show their wife's photograph to government officials. We know that these photos could be misused in social media, so some people are putting a fake photo of their wife on the ration card.

His colleague, and founder of the welfare society, Abdul reflected a similar sentiment, arguing ' … When a woman's photo is on the card then it may go anywhere, in many places and departments. It is an insult to our women'. These are not homogenised perspectives amongst men in the *mohallas* but do reflect common discourses that bring together questions of female seclusion, suspicion of (usually non-Muslim) state officials, and concerns about digital spaces where women's images can be appropriated.

Several women articulated similar concerns. On the edge of Saharanpur, we met two neighbours, Gulshan and Farah. Reflecting on the change of named ration card holder, Farah argued:

> … it is not good. Our society does not allow us to go here and there to make these applications. It is an insult for our husbands.

Gulshan echoed her statement:

> … no, to me it is not right. My husband cannot leave his shop to go with me to make any application. No other person is here who could get the ration on my card. Now the ration card is of no use.

Whilst there was aspiration to be recognised as rights-bearing citizens, concerns about a masculinised everyday state constrained desires to be 'seen' by the state. Drawing on ethnographic research in Papua New Guinean government hospitals, Alice Street (2012) details a state that is often conspicuous in its absence. Whilst the reach and scope of the Indian state is substantial, in Saharanpur's Muslim *mohallas* there was also a sense of 'absent presence' regarding the state (cf. Williams 2011). This, however, was not symbolic of an absence of presence, in the binary sense, but rather a lack of state intervention was itself a governmental decision of the state. Street (2012) describes how, in Papua New Guinea, hospital patients used the materialities of bureaucratic processes to make themselves legible to the state (cf. Stadlen, this issue). However, for many Muslim women in the *mohallas,* 'being seen' posed specific problematics vis-à-vis a masculinised materiality of the everyday state and the gendered expectations of their community (cf. Hasan 2018).

The intersection between state and community acted to reproduce two sets of hegemonic processes that became embedded in the rejection of visibilisation. On the one hand, it deepened forms of marginalisation. On the other, it played into predominant patriarchal structures. Yet, politics in Saharanpur's *mohallas* were – as with anywhere – discursive, complex and played out across public and private contexts. Zeenat (40) was a schoolteacher. Her perspective was more favourable towards the NFSA but also reflected concerns about the intermingling of state bureaucracies and familial politics.

> Muslim men think it is not good for their women, but nowadays Muslim women are working in many fields. They [men] say that their thinking is modern and that they should send their daughters to school. But when the question arises for ration card ownership then suddenly they remember their Islam or our *hijab*. It is not our faith that makes men not like this system. Men do not like this change as, if there is any dispute or partition in a family, then a woman can show it [the ration card] as evidence that she was living in this house. Men are afraid if the ration card will be in the name of women, then women will get power and will not live under the same pressure.

Concerns around the embeddedness of ration cards within familial politics were born out by the experiences of several women, particularly in cases of estrangement or divorce. Farida, a recently divorced woman in a neighbouring village, described how her former husband's relationship with

a local *netā* (politician) led to him blocking her from obtaining a ration card independent of his family. In another village, Saadnah – who was also estranged from her husband's family due to divorce – explained that the separation not only meant losing her two sons but also a ration card as her husband's family refused to remove her name from their card. As such, the local ration dealer continued to issue her ration to her husband's family. For others, though, the same forms of embeddedness could be more facilitating. Zaara, who was married with three young children, detailed a different positionality ' … I don't do any of that work [applying for documents or making claims from the state]. My husband's father used to be the *Pradhan* here and we have many sources [social/political contacts]'.

Whilst variegated positionalities were inflected in engagements – or lack of engagement – with the state, a more unifying feature of women's experiences concerned gendered notions of temporality and work. Across town, we met Nasir. A broker in state documents, Nasir saw the implications of the NFSA as connected not only to *purdah* and piety but also to assumptions of women's limited capacity to challenge officials and others when engaging with the state's masculinised bureaucracy. In the context of ration shops, Nasir suggested that the removal of the 'powerful [male] person' from the ration card led to the 'ration dealer getting people's rations in his pocket'. It was a view echoed by others which reproduced notions of female passivity. Yet, despite conceptions that situated women as 'less capable', it was often women who negotiated with state bureaucracies. When pressed on this point, Nasir suggested that men 'did not have time to do this work'. This gendered division of time was a commonplace distinction that fed into questions of *value* and *work* in ways which diminished the significance of women's time and thus thrust women (particularly poorer women) into the wasteful – and often unsuccessful – work of claim-making (cf. Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019).

In another *mohalla*, we met Aiza. In her late 30s with a son whose marriage was approaching and three daughters in their teens, Aiza's family had recently renewed their ration card after a house fire destroyed the original. Following the changes brought about by the NFSA, Aiza's name now appeared on the card. In contrast to the stated intention of section 13, however, Aiza saw this as both an empowerment and a burden.

> It is good women have rights but it is also a headache. Women already have so much work. Men used to help with ration card work but now the government has freed them of responsibility. Women have no knowledge of online systems, so have to wander here and there. Often the ration dealer steals our rations, we have no unity and our husbands do not want us to raise our voice as this is not respectful. Our husbands think that if we try to fight this corruption then we will have to go outside too often. They think that it is not their problem, so no one fights the ration dealer … he is the only winner.

Writing on Egypt, Elyachar (2010) has illustrated how informal networks amongst women in Cairo acted as conduits which contributed to the common good but also offered sites for the extraction of surplus value[7] (cf. Chambers 2020b). Ascribing 'value' to the *labour* of women in building, cultivating and maintaining peopled infrastructures, illustrates the hidden labour therein. In Saharanpur, too, informal channels allowed women degrees of access to the state but navigating informal pathways – and more formal spaces – was labour intensive, leading women to articulate such activity explicitly as *work* (cf. Stadlen, this issue).

Although the experiences discussed in this section were not homogenous, collectively they illustrate the engagement of Muslim women in producing a politics that transcends boundaries of public and private, reinforces or challenges existing power structures and is active in shaping the imaginaries and materialities of the everyday state; particularity when we accept its highly blurred boundaries (Gupta 1995). Yet, the seepage of the state, through forms of brokerage and various documents, cards and paperwork, into the *mohallas* and into the homes of residents often re-enforced patriarchal relations despite attempts to reconfigure the materialities of bureaucratic processes. In the following section, we continue expanding these themes by focusing on one of the most marginalised groups of women within the *mohallas* (and in many other contexts in India).

Widows' pensions: gendered bodies & gendered spaces

Widows have long experienced some of the highest degrees of vulnerability in terms of securing a livelihood, income and social position (Afridi, Iversen, and Sharan 2017). In Saharanpur, these patterns carried through into women's engagements with the state. Such activities also became mediated by the need to negotiate gendered ideals around '*chāl-chalan*', a vernacular that has been variously translated as referring to one's behaviour, public persona, mode of moving about, embodied norms or demeanour (Chambers 2020a). It also became a central factor in women's engagements with the everyday state, particularly where these activities involved masculinised spaces beyond the city's Muslim *mohallas*. Thus, for those without a male breadwinner in the household, attempts to access the NFBS and IGNWPS also involved navigating *chāl-chalan*.

Bilal Nagar village lies around 5 km from the outskirts of Saharanpur. As with many villages in the area, it is roughly split between Hindus and Muslims. On the edge of the sprawling, low-level and largely mud-walled houses that constitute much of Bilal Nagar, we met Gulaab, a 34-year-old recent widow whose attempts to access the NFBS payment had proved problematic. As Gulaab explained, 'I am a widow and my husband was poor so I cannot pay money for someone to help with this. The *Pradhan* is not interested in my case either. He will only help the people with whom he has a strong relation'. Gulaab's limited access to informal networks also impacted on her ability to get a ration card in her name rather than that of her deceased husband. In order to obtain a new card Gulaab tried applying in person but found the officials dismissive and she had to negotiate questions about her *chāl-chalan*:

> … Society is very rude to me. I am alone and no one helps. If I go to any place to apply for a document or government scheme, then they think I am a very characterless woman … but my husband is dead so what can I do? The women in the village suspect me. If I talk to any man, they suspect my character, so it is better to sit at home without a ration card.

Noor, a 40-year-old widow in Saharanpur, described similar experiences following the passing of her husband. Her efforts resulted only in a process of chronic waiting and endless to-and-fro journeys to numerous sites of state interaction (cf. Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019).

> For 11 years, I went to many offices and filled many forms for a widow's pension [IGNWPS]. I have no ration card and have been to many offices to try and get one. Lots of money is needed as a bribe, but still no result! One officer lied. He said my pension was ready at the post office, but when I went there the post officer shouted 'every day lots of widows come here like you, we cannot do anything, it is the government problem. Do not come here.

As younger widows, Gulaab and Noor were particularly affected by expectations surrounding women's engagements with the public sphere. A short motorbike ride from Bilal Nagar lay the village of Asafapur. In the courtyard of her small home, we sat down to speak with Afsa, a widow in her late sixties. Afsa described how a combination of her advancing age and the passing of her husband ten years earlier had changed her engagements with the public sphere. Her advancing years, in particular, had enabled her to travel to government offices without the same degree of questioning of her *chāl-chalan* that Gulaab and Noor had experienced.

> I am old so can go here and there, there is no restriction for me. I go for the *Tabligh* [religious meetings] and it was at these meetings that other women told me about the widow's payment after my husband died. It is ₹20,000 [one off] but no one helps me get this. In our village no one informed me about it, and it was only the Tablighi women who told me. When my *iddat* [mourning period][8] was completed, I enquired about it [at the office in Saharanpur] but there was no response. I also went to the *Pradhan's* house, but he just laughed and said, Don't think about the widow card, you have four sons, they can earn for you. […] When I was a young woman I could not go outside. Only my husband knew about documents and applications so I cannot tell you how things were then. My husband was very strict. He never told me anything. All I knew then [50 years ago when she married] was that the ration card was our proof of identity. Only after my husband died did I start going outside to the government office and other places. Now I am learning about these things, but I have been many times in the government office and still the payment has not come.

Not only does Afsa's narrative draw out how age intersects in mediating women's engagements with the state but her description of how her involvement in *Tablighi Jamaat* provided access to information on the NFBS begins to hint at other pathways through which women negotiated the state's welfare infrastructure (cf. Singerman 1995; Elyachar 2010).

In her research on women's Islamic networks in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2012) describes the diversity of women who attended religious seminaries at various mosques across the city and the forms of support that involvement in reformist movements could enable (cf. Jasani 2008; Johnson and Werbner 2010; Ahmad 2017). Afsa's involvement with a network of women within the context of *Tablighi* meetings had not enabled her to obtain the NFBS, but it had provided a space within which women exchanged information about the state's bureaucratic systems, welfare provisioning and PDS. Thus, the usual method of identifying beneficiaries via *Gram Panchayats* (village councils) or municipalities was circumvented as women informed each other of various citizenship rights beyond male-dominated pathways and spaces.

Despite this, the majority of informal pathways and sources of information were, as with the everyday day state itself, often masculinised. Back in Saharanpur, we met Yasmeen. Like Afsa, she was in her sixties, although she could not recall her exact age. One issue some women raised with NFBS payments, and with applications for the related IGNWPS, was the need for a bank account to facilitate the monthly cash transfers. Yasmeen's negotiation with the state not only involved interactions with various male brokers but also required mediation by local male religious leaders in order to legitimate these activities.

> When I was in *iddat* [mourning period] for 4 months and 10 days my relatives went in the *madrasa* to ask for a *fatwā* [ruling in the context of Islamic law]. They asked if I could go to the bank during *iddat* in order to apply for an account [to facilitate NFBS/IGNWPS payments]. The *Mufti* [Islamic jurist] gave permission as I am an old woman and can go in the *burqa*. When I had the bank account, I was able to apply for the widow's payment. I tried at the office, but it was too difficult to get and the government officers would not help me. I also needed the death certificate [for deceased husband]. I don't know how I got the death certificate as my relatives arranged it. A lawyer helped me with claiming the widow's payment [NFBS] and he said he would take ₹5000 from it for the work. So, in the end, I got ₹15,000. I also tried for the widow's pension, but I did not receive this as, when the officers came for the survey, they didn't give me a slip [to document her situation]. I asked my relative for help and he met with a middleman. That middleman took ₹100 and said that I would get the pension in January last year [2015] but he made a fool of me and it did not come.

The accepted wisdom, ascribed to by Yasmeen and others, was that making the system work required the services of a broker or the patronage of a local representative such as a *pradhan* or *netā*. These actors, it was assumed, understood bureaucratic processes, were able to deliver financial motivation where required, or had sufficient authority to lean on officials and bureaucrats – an act vernacularised as *sifārish* (Chambers 2020b; Evans 2012). Expectations of preserving one's *chāl-chalan*, combined with the masculine gendering of the everyday state, meant that women often relied on male brokers to navigate bureaucratic infrastructures and processes of claim-making. As hinted at by Afsa's involvement with the *Tablighi Jamaat* and Yasmeen's ability to obtain a *fatwā*, women were not entirely agentless in these processes. However, these informal avenues were – as with the government offices on the far side of town – distinctly male-dominated spaces that extended the masculine construction of the everyday state into the *mohallas* themselves. As with so many contexts, however, there were exceptions and – whilst few in number – some women were involved in constructing and maintaining pathways to the state which re-inscribed male-dominated spaces and challenged dominant ideals of female passivity.

Becoming a 'dangerous woman': brokering with the everyday state

> … the broker has to mediate and translate between two moral universes that are incompatible and perhaps even incommensurable. To the extent that such a broker is successful in *his* job, *he* often has to live in town, closer to the offices where villagers have to come to get their work done. (Gupta 2005, 24, our emphasis)

Gupta (2005) articulates the gendered assumption that brokerage with the state is a male pursuit involving men in masculine spaces and engaging, mostly, with other men. At the level of broad patterns and trends, Gupta is correct in reflecting a prevalent male dominance of brokerage pathways in India (Kruks-Wisner 2018; cf. Berenschot 2019; Witsoe 2012; for some exceptions see: Webb 2012; Williams, Devika, and Aandahl 2015; Bedi 2016; Afridi, Iversen, and Sharan 2017). In a context where the everyday state is itself highly gendered this pattern is, perhaps, not surprising. Where women's engagements are noted, they are usually situated either as clients of brokerage services or as victims of unscrupulous brokers who con them out of cash payments, welfare claims or land (e.g., Simon 2009; Levien 2012; Webb 2012). But this masks instances where women – in this case relatively poor Muslim women – fulfil brokerage roles and deploy various tools and tactics in their engagements with the state that disrupt representations of Muslim women as agentless victims who are disengaged from public politics (see also: Jeffery 1979; Mahmood 2012; Hasan 2018).

Very few Muslim women operated as brokers in the *mohallas* and it took us considerable time to locate Razda. In her early forties, Razda had started her journey to becoming a broker following her own engagement with processes of claim-making after her divorce some ten years earlier:

> My help is important because women always remain in the veil or *hijab*, but I cannot do *purdah* as I have to do work outside. I must go here and there because I took a divorce. Now, after many years doing this, I have the knowledge and boldness for work in official places that a woman who lives in the home cannot have courage for. First, I was afraid but now I have confidence and have no fear of anyone.

> I am like a dangerous woman and all the [government] officers know me as a dangerous woman. Muslim women are very timid and shy, there is no boldness, but I am not like this. Now I am famous amongst the women, but the men gossip about me, they say that I go in all the offices and that this is disrespectful in Muslim society. All the departments now dislike me because of my boldness. I never give a bribe when I can just raise my voice. Every officer has some fear of me and thinks I can expose their corruption. When I arrive, they say to each other that they should do my work fast so there is no argument.

> All the women want to go with me when the ration is distributed because I never stand in line and I can go directly into the shop. When the ration dealer sees me, he at once instructs his servant to give me the ration first due to his fear. The ration dealer knows that he cannot do any corruption when I am there as I will make complaints about him. So, then the other women also get benefit as he gives them their ration as well.

The extent of Razda's engagement with brokerage work and her ability to challenge government bureaucrats and others may offer a somewhat exceptional case. Nonetheless, it provides an evocative challenge to many of the assumptions that surround both brokerage and Muslim women in India. In certain respects, Razda consciously countered gendered norms through her willingness to enter the masculine spaces of the everyday state and raise her voice in battles with bureaucrats and others. However, her ability to do so was not detached from broader gendered intersections. Male *netās* (politicians) and other political actors regularly engaged in similar vocal performances which acted to legitimise their authority in the eyes of their vote-base but also drew on a degree of safety offered by their political office (see Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019; Chambers 2020b). For Muslim men who were not afforded such status, however, attempts to raise one's voice in a government office could result in arrest and/or violence. Here, Razda's female positionality offered some degree of protection. Thus, 35-year-old Sameera, a married women and mother of three, reflected on her recent experience where women had collectively challenged officials over lengthy waiting times at a government-sponsored Aadhaar camp for issuing new biometric ID cards.

> Women can talk more than men and shout if it is getting late. They can quarrel with officers without fear. Women can talk in an abusive language and make a great deal of noise, but men cannot do this as the police can beat them, but it is not so easy for the police to beat women as it would look very bad for them.

Sameera's case reveals how gender norms that often restricted women could, in some circumstances, be subverted to enable effective forms of confrontational performance to the enacted (cf. Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019). It also offered Razda an avenue through which she could strengthen her hand as a broker, instil a degree of fear in male bureaucrats or officials and build

her persona as a 'dangerous woman'. Her actions consciously subverted the sense of being 'out of place' that constituted many Muslim women's engagements with government offices and other sites of state bureaucracy. Razda described how the 'shock' experienced by government officials, as a result of her 'out of place' behaviour in their offices, acted as a source of power through which she cemented her capacity as a successful broker. In this case, then, the masculine imaginary and material configuration of the everyday state were precisely the constructed attributes that Razda utilised to gain a foothold as a broker.

Conclusion

Empirically, then, this article makes significant contributions to research focused on de-homogenising representations of Muslim women in India. The experiences of the women detailed above are embedded in social/economic positions, relations with broader familial contexts, class, marital status, life stage and personal biographies. This latter intersection is of particular importance as it reminds us that shared identity characteristics do not necessarily result in identical outcomes. Razda's positionality was similar to several other women featured in this article, yet her emergence as a broker and a 'dangerous woman' not only challenged gendered assumptions around brokerage in India but also resulted from her personal biography and her willingness to invert the gendered spatial norms of the everyday state. Even those who subscribed to a more pious position and minimised engagements with the state did so in the context of their own habituated experiences as well as broader ideological, religious and political frameworks. Whilst 'state' and 'community' intertwined in a variety of ways (cf. Hasan 2018), the article has also detailed how bureaucratic structures, spatial configurations and urban cosmologies acted to additionally mediate interactions between Muslim women from the city's *mohallas* and everyday sites of state engagement that encompassed not only public space but also familial and domestic contexts in ways that are historically particularised and subtly embedded.

Building on previous literature, we have illustrated the active, bottom-up forms of citizenship engaged in by Muslim women. However, we have also expanded on prior research by not only emphasising the role an individual's gender (among other intersections) in shaping experiences of citizenship but also detailed how constructions of the state itself – both at the level of a national imaginary and in the context of the everyday state – is itself gendered. These renderings had a significant impact on the felt experiences of Muslim women vis-à-vis the Indian state. From the expanding influence of a muscular Hindu nationalism to the gendered spatialisation of government offices and sites of interaction, the constructed gender of the state, not only that of the citizen, matters.

Notes

1. All names of places (below the city level) and people are pseudonyms.
2. Some details in this account have been changed to anonymise people and locations.
3. Research for this article was conducted before the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) which has added additional material and bureaucratic vectors of marginalisation. The data presented here also only covers the pre-COVID-19 context.
4. First introduced during World War Two, and active in its current form since 1947, India's PDS system is a food security system that distributes food and other essentials at discounted rates to the population through 'Fair Price Shops' (more commonly referred to as 'ration shops').
5. The world's largest biometric ID system, launched in 2009, the Aadhaar scheme is orchestrated by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) and involves the establishment of a citizenry database under the auspices of the Central Identities Data Repository (CIDR) and through the issuing of a biometric identity card to every citizen.
6. BPL widows over 79 are provisioned through the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS).
7. Published research drawn from the same project as this article has detailed specific ways in which informal pathways of mediation – incorporating both women and men – become marketized within contemporary reconfigurations – often involving degrees of digitisation – of India's state bureaucracy (Chambers 2020b).
8. Lasting 4 months and 10 days, *Iddat* is a mourning period during which women isolate within the home.

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