Beyond Discrimination: Aspirations for Self-employment Among Muslim Youth in Delhi

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Abstract
While it is argued that Muslims are concentrated in self-employment activities, apart from noting discrimination in salaried work resulting in a push into self-employment, research has not explored additional reasons contributing to this choice. This paper employs a mixed-methods approach and through an empirically grounded work, explores the reasons given by Muslim male and female youth, primarily living in the segregated neighbourhood of Jamia Nagar in New Delhi, India, for the choice of self-employment among Muslim youth. The paper notes that while discrimination in salaried work featured as a significant reason for the choice of self-employment, it was not the overwhelming one. The choice for self-employment, rather, was attributed to a number of reasons, the salient ones being the presence of social networks in self-employment in Jamia Nagar, and the social respect earned through ownership of self-employment (apna kaam). In the narratives of the women youth, safety and respectability offered by self-employment in Jamia Nagar were highlighted as critical reasons attracting them to such occupations.

Keywords Muslim · Youth · Self-employment · Segregated neighbourhoods · Women in self-employment

Introduction
An important contribution within research on the socio-economic condition of Muslims in India is the Sachar Committee Report (henceforth SCR), the first of its kind. The employment indicators discussed by the SCR place Muslims at a
significantly disadvantageous position as compared to other socio-religious groups\(^2\) ([GOI], 2006). Among other critical issues (see Borooah 2010; Unni 2010; GOI 2006; Khan 2019) pertaining to employment of Muslims in India, the SCR highlights that compared to all socio-religious groups, being Muslim has large and significant positive effects on participation in low-paid self-employment (GOI 2006). Compared to all socio-religious groups, Muslims continue to be over-represented in self-employment activities as shown by more recent government reports (GOI 2016; GOI 2019). Muslim women have the highest representation in self-employment among all major socio-religious groups (GOI 2016; also see Hasan and Menon 2005).

According to the SCR, a deep perception of discrimination is reported by Muslims, including in securing salaried employment, listing it as the main reason for their employment-based disadvantage. Similarly, discrimination in the salaried labour market faced by Muslims and consequently, a push into self-employment activities is reported by previous research (Das 2010; Mhaskar 2018). Das (2010) speculates that in urban areas, Muslim men are concentrated in self-employment.\(^3\) They also live and operate their businesses in geographical clusters and Das highlights that minority enclaves for self-employment exist for Muslim men, similar to the ethnic enclaves in the USA (ibid). Das (2010) shows that Muslim men with little or no education are in self-employment, arguing that these enclaves offer low-paying self-employment options.

Mhaskar’s (2018) work among Muslim ex-mill workers in Mumbai shows that they are concentrated in self-employment rejected by Hindu general castes and Hindu Other Backward Classes (OBCs) because they are low paying and/or low status. Muslims, therefore, are not only residentially ghettoised but also work in a ‘ghettoised economy’. The mill workers have developed networks in this economy which has helped entry of others from their community (see Jodhka 2010, for similar findings about Dalits in business in segregated areas). Reporting with fictitious respondents from different caste and religious groups, Thorat and Attewell (2010) found that candidates with Muslim names received fewer calls for job interviews in metropolitan cities in India, than equally qualified high-caste Hindus. Extensive qualitative research on Muslims in self-employment and additional reasons contributing to their higher participation is, however, under-researched. One notable exception is Chambers (2020) ethnographic work on Muslims in the woodwork industry in Saharanpur focusing on the self-employed, where marginalisation and connectedness are dual features of the experiences of the respondents.

Given the heterogeneity of Muslims in India, does discrimination account for the choice of self-employment or \textit{apna kaam/khud ka kaam} in other social settings as

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\(^2\) Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Hindu-Other Backward Classes, Hindu-General, and other minorities.

\(^3\) The paper broadly adopts the definition of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), according to which self-employed people operate their own farm or non-farm enterprises or are engaged independently in a profession or trade, either on own-account or with one or a few partners (GOI 2001). The self-employed have autonomy to decide how, where, and when to produce, and exercise economic independence in terms of market, scale of operation and finance, for carrying out their operation (ibid). The remuneration of the self-employed consists of a non-separable combination of two parts; a reward for their labour and profit of their enterprise (ibid).
well? By noting that a significant number of the youth in the segregated neighbourhood of Jamia Nagar, Delhi, are engaged as owners of self-employment, the paper aims to discuss the reasons that contribute to this choice. Using a mixed-methods approach, the paper engages with the opinions and narratives around discrimination in salaried work (located outside segregated neighbourhoods, unless specified otherwise) of Muslim youth who have ever worked in the salaried sector (located outside segregated neighbourhoods, unless specified otherwise), but views contestations in these narratives. Feelings of discrimination and marginalisation while critical to the experience of being a Muslim in the present times in India are interspersed with narratives of hope (Berlant 2011; Bourdieu 2000; Jackson 2011) that complicate it. Optimism that cannot be entirely unattributed to the larger discourse on neoliberal emphasis on aspirations and merit (discussed later) aid to diminish the perception of discrimination among middle-class youth in Delhi. Self-employment offers Muslim youth hope for a good life (Fischer 2014) and a sense of respect, dignity, and well-being (Jackson 2011).

For Muslim women, it is their only chance for engagement with the labour market and offers an alternative narrative to the labour market discrimination and exclusion of women in India (Klasen and Pieters 2015; Mehrotra and Sinha 2017; Zyskowski 2020). To this end, the paper includes reasons beyond discrimination expressed by Muslim women and men, thereby enriching and contributing to the previous literature on this topic. The discussions from segregated Jamia Nagar are contrasted with the narratives of Muslim youth living in non-segregated neighbourhoods in Delhi who neither aspire for nor choose self-employment as a career.

**Youth Employment in India**

Within the neoliberal discourse, India’s rise to a global economic power accompanies the aspiration of its people to be active participants in its success story (Gooptu 2013; Mankekar 2015). Emboldened by access to educational opportunities (see Jeffrey 2010; Kumar 2016) and the projection of ease of upward social mobility in the country (Gooptu 2013), youth are striving to advance for a ‘good life’ (Fischer, 2014). These aspirations are formed and bolstered by the phenomenal success stories of seemingly ordinary people popularised by the media (Gooptu 2013; Mankekar 2015). Media portrayal of India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi selling tea in his youth has captured the imagination of India’s heterogeneous middle-class and those who aspire to join its ranks. Such discourse points towards a future with few uncertainties and where people are in control of their destiny. This has led to the somewhat unbridled faith in hard work and merit among Muslim youth (Salman

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4 Scholars argue that the middle-class has structurally and historically occupied an intermediary position (Deshpande 2003; Fernandes and Heller 2011). The class derives its power and economic opportunities not from property but organizational authority or possession of scarce occupational skills and in the post-liberalization period, concentrated in professional jobs (Fernandes 2006; Fernandes and Heller 2011). Harris-White shows that due to reasons such as migration of elite Muslims to Pakistan and independent India’s policies favouring upper caste Hindus, Muslims are under-represented among this middle-class (Harris-White 2003).
2020), although challenges to such a narrative are also documented (see Jeffrey et al. 2008). The contestations to the discourse on discrimination presented in this paper are deeply seeped in this logic, whereby Muslim youth believe that they could ‘make it’ (McLeod 2009) with hard work.

While aspirations are an all-time high, the onus of achieving them is on the individual, demanding the development of the ‘enterprising self’ (Gooptu 2013). Here, private resources have to be channelised to achieve aspirations and navigate uncertainties to secure the future. People are required to be the agents of the change that they envisage in their lives and this change to is envisaged through ownership of self-employment (see Chambers 2020). The voices of the Muslim youth in this paper express a similar sentiment.

Despite high aspirations, employment opportunities for youth in India remain a challenge. According to one of the latest government reports, nationwide unemployment rate for male youth in urban India was 18.7%, and for females, it was 27.2% (GOI 2019: viii). As with other developing countries, in India, there is greater unemployment among the youth with tertiary (or higher) education (Bairagya 2018). These problems are likely exacerbated for Muslim youth, given the context of employment-based disadvantages of the community.

Additionally, Muslim youth have a higher concentration in self-employment among youth of all socio-economic groups, according to large scale all India youth surveys (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) 2017), although this research does not delve into the reasons for the same. Focused work on youth, such as Jeffrey et al.’s (2008) study in Bijnor, shows that educated Muslim youth ultimately resorted to self-employment in traditional occupations, such as tailoring, in the wake of employment scarcity. The focus of Jeffrey et al.’s work was however not Muslims and the engagement with this theme remains limited. Moreover, among Muslims, the perception of facing discriminatory attitudes is higher among the youth (GOI 2006, p. 15) but the SCR does not explore this issue in depth. Given that Muslim youth are concentrated and pushed into self-employment, but adequate reasons for the same have not been documented, this paper aims to fill the gap.

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5 Bucholtz (2002) notes that the understanding of youth varies from one culture to another. In some cultures, youth comprise of only teens, whereas in others, those in their thirties and forties would also count as youth (ibid). The understanding of youth also varies according to employment and marital status of the person, especially for male youth (see Chowdhry 2005 for a brilliant discussion on unmarried and unemployed male youth in Haryana, also see Jeffrey 2010). Official sources in India and other reports such those by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) define the youth between the age group of 15–29 and 15–34 years, respectively. For this paper, the definition of CSDS will be used for the upper age limit, but for the lower age, the limit is fixed at 21 years so that the employment choices of people can be captured. It is expected that in urban areas, youth would have completed at least school level education by the time they are 21 years of age their employment choices and aspirations would have materialized by then.

6 Youth unemployment and underemployment is defined as those who are unable to find jobs commensurate with their training and skills and has been identified as a cause of concern across countries (GOI 2017). Specific measures are taken to address these concerns. For instance, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals has identified youth (along with concerns around their employment) as a focus group (see https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/world-youth-report/wyr2018.html; accessed on 24. 01. 2021).
Research Methods

Adopting a mixed-methods approach (Axinn and Pearce 2006; Creswell 2014; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998, 2009), this paper discusses results from a survey using systematic random sampling techniques (Babbie 2007) in two localities (Batla House and Zakir Nagar) in Jamia Nagar. Conducted mostly among Muslim middle-class youth, both men and women, it points towards broad patterns and generalisable results (Babbie 2007). An in-depth qualitative study followed this, among a smaller section of the youth, selected from the ones surveyed in the first round, to gain a nuanced understanding of the findings of the survey, by grounding them in lived-experiences (Hesse-Biber 2015).

In the survey phase, one thirty-two interviews were conducted with male (59% of sample) and female (41% of sample) youth (ages 21 to 34 years), from mixed socio-economic backgrounds, living in Batla House and Zakir Nagar. For the second phase of the research, twenty-one youth respondents agreed to be interviewed from among those surveyed. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with them. Eight out of the twenty one respondents were interviewed again, telephonically, in August 2020, to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their employment choices and aspirations.

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with Muslim youth in diverse non-segregated neighbourhoods in Delhi, using purposive sampling techniques, to address the research aims of the author’s doctoral thesis. The perspectives of these youth are used to contrast the discussions of the youth in Jamia Nagar. This paper is thus based on information gathered from one-hundred and seventy-one interviews with Muslim youth in Delhi, thereby presenting a focused empirical work on self-employment.

Accounting experiences of discrimination by respondents is also affected by the position of the researcher (Holmes 2020). I have a Muslim name, live not far from Batla House and Zakir Nagar in Delhi, identify as middle-class and was not significantly older than many respondents while conducting fieldwork, which might have worked to my advantage. In the social and political uncertainty imposed by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), respondents believed that I might share their anxieties, perhaps enabling a closer working relationship. I am acutely aware that whatever be the similarities, hierarchical relationships work are multiple and unpredictable (see Mellor et al. 2014 for a discussion on how matching between respondent and researchers, particularly in terms of social class, can be problematised). I

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7 These localities were selected from the 17 localities that comprise Jamia Nagar, using simple random sampling and were identified from the data provided by the election commission of Delhi. All these 17 localities fall within the Assembly Constituency of Okhla (http://ceodelhi.gov.in/ConstituencyDetailENG1.aspx?num=agbjWv9iAQ5rcCl6VQ/YnQ==&ii=e).

8 90 percent of the respondents in the survey phase identified themselves as the middle-class. The class of origin in terms of father’s occupation indicates that a majority of the respondents were from professional class origins.

9 India introduced the Citizenship Amendment Act in late 2019, which many felt would threaten the citizenship status of India’s Muslim population (https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/caa-nrc-may-affect-status-of-indias-muslim-minority-congressional-research-service/article30409109.ece (accessed on 29.03.2021)).
contextualise youth narratives, especially around discrimination, within these hierarchies. Before discussing the results from the field site, the paper highlights the somewhat peculiar case of the research cite, Jamia Nagar.

Segregated Neighbourhoods: Jamia Nagar

Research highlights that Indian cities report widespread residential segregation\textsuperscript{10} of Muslims (Chatterjee 2017; Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012; Jamil 2017; Kazim 2018; Khan 2007; Kirmani 2013). Among eleven cities and metros across India, Delhi has the highest degree of residential segregation of Muslims (Susewind 2017), next only to the riot prone ‘ghetto’ Juhapura, in Gujarat (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012). In Delhi, with each successive communal rioting reported across India, the process of residential segregation of Muslims has intensified (Gayer 2012; Jamil 2017; Kirmani 2013).

Jamia Nagar displays features not limited to that of other segregated neighbourhoods such as the ones discussed in Chambers’ (2020) ethnography or Juhapura in Gujarat (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012). Jamia Nagar derives its name from that of a well-established university called Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), around which the neighbourhoods where the fieldwork was conducted are located. The University attracts thousands of students and faculty from other areas and communities of Delhi and other states, as well as from Jamia Nagar, diluting the spatial and social isolation of Jamia Nagar.

Unauthorised localities in Jamia Nagar lack state presence, seen through the limited provisioning of government schools, hospitals, infrastructure such as roads, water, waste disposal, and amenities like parks and open spaces (see also Contractor 2012; Gayer and Jaffrelot, 2012; Kirmani 2013). Residents channelise private resources into procuring these facilities and only those with means can afford them, while others languish. Unauthorised localities in Jamia Nagar are comparable to areas of urban marginality and neglect, such as Vita in Brazil (Biehl 2013), the unauthorised areas of Sangam Vihar in Delhi (Priyam 2014) and deprived neighbourhoods in the USA and France (Wacquant 2008).

Authorised localities in Jamia Nagar, however, receive state amenities and house mostly upper-middle-class Muslim elite, many of whom have been living in Jamia Nagar for decades, because of their early association with Jamia University as professors and non-teaching staff. Several have political connections, especially with the Indian National Congress. These elites have access to quality higher education and high status professional employment along with transnational networks (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992) in Europe and the USA. These

\textsuperscript{10} Three types of segregation has been addressed in several works, such as Marcuse (1997). Ghettos broadly refer to forced segregation of a group; enclaves refers to self-segregation as a means to protect cultural identity and citadel refers to segregation of elites to separate themselves from non-elites-one example of the latter being gated colonies (ibid). These categories are however ideal types and spaces could share characteristics that are overlapping (ibid).
networks are used to procure educational and employment opportunities abroad and share characteristics of connectedness discussed in Chambers’ work (2020).

To complicate matters further, most respondents narrated the advantages of staying in Jamia Nagar, extending beyond the provisioning of a safe environment for Muslims. This included cheap housing, good physical connectivity, availability of affordable and good food, an alive and bustling environment, and the presence of Jamia University in its vicinity serving as a source of education and employment. They believed that looking for work outside Jamia Nagar is not a problem for them and they did not see the area as marginalised and deprived.

Residents of Jamia Nagar from diverse socio-economic backgrounds also rely on the neighbourhood for employment opportunities. The relatively elite residents sought jobs in the Jamia University and Jamia Schools. Others aspired to or were engaged in businesses and other self-employment ventures, including women, as will be discussed in the paper. At the same time, due to the prime location of Jamia Nagar in New Delhi and the good physical connectivity to the rest of the National Capital Territory of Delhi in the form of public transport such as the Delhi metro, has enabled residents to seek work in other areas of the city. This can be seen through the presence of a significant percent of the respondents in professional jobs as discussed in Table 1. The presence of the Delhi metro also shows that there is not a complete neglect by the state in terms of infrastructural provisioning. Jamia Nagar is therefore not on the periphery of Delhi and of urban marginality unlike the neighbourhoods studied by Chambers (2020) for instance. Low reporting of discrimination in employment among middle-class Muslims is shaped by these local contexts which provide them with the perception of ease of upward mobility, good resources and fair amenities. They are also shaped by the larger neoliberal discourse around aspirations discussed before.

While unauthorised localities in Jamia Nagar face state neglect, paradoxically, state presence in the form of repression and surveillance is found in Jamia Nagar. A recent example of state repression in Jamia Nagar was the attack on students of

| Occupation type       | Percentage |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Own business          | 30         |
| Own profession        | 11         |
| Service/Job           | 55         |
| Manual labour         | 4          |
| Total                 | 100        |
| N                     | 73         |

The categories for type of occupation are adopted from the Education and Social Mobility Survey-2012 Questionnaire of Dr. Divya Vaid and conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. All figures are rounded to the nearest decimal point.
Jamia University in December 2019. This is not to say that larger political context has no local bearings. After the political ascent of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, the marginalisation of Muslims has heightened through ‘state-sponsored cultural practices of exclusion’ exemplified through the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (Heller 2020: 4; see also Jaffrelot 2020). Politically, their representation has fallen, so much so that in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, from the winning BJP, there was not a single Muslim member of parliament (Jaffrelot 2019). During the rule of the BJP, Delhi saw two communal riots between Hindus and Muslims, in 2020 and 2022 respectively. The riot in 2020 was the first between the two communities since 1947, when India was partitioned. Both riots have heightened the perception of insecurity among residents in Jamia Nagar, although during the interviews, the coronavirus pandemic overshadowed these sentiment, as millions of lives were lost in India, particularly during April–May 2021. These incidents have to be borne in mind as they shape the larger discourse on discrimination and marginalisation of Muslims in India.

A Brief Overview of Respondents in Self-Employment in Jamia Nagar

As reported in the survey round, from Table 1, out of the employed youth in Jamia Nagar, 30% were involved in their own business and 11% were involved in their own professional activities. This indicates that 41% of the respondents were self-employed, and the operations of a majority were in Jamia Nagar. 55 percent of the working youth were in services or jobs. Only 4% youth were in manual jobs. The employment choices in Jamia Nagar indicate the relatively middle-class background of the youth, discussed before.

In the first category which is that of business, 37% were running either small grocery shops (23%) or medium-sized grocery stores (14%). Hence, petty business accounted for a substantial percentage among those in business. Nearly 14% were tailors and 9% had real estate businesses in the neighbourhood of Jamia Nagar. The rest were owners of small restaurants, barber shop/salon, export businesses, and so on. Almost all the respondents in business were working in the neighbourhood of Jamia Nagar. Jamia Nagar being densely populated offered a steady clientele to several business and professional owners, which meant that most were not in low paid
self-employment, unlike the discussions in the works of Das (2010), Mhaskar (2018), and the SCR (GOI 2006). Artisanal work, which Muslims are traditionally associated with (GOI 2006) and documented in the works of Chambers (2020) and Chatterjee (2017) among others, is missing in the case of Batla House and Zakir Nagar.

The second category is the self-employed working as professionals. This included tutors, photographers, owners of coaching centres, accountants, stockbrokers, *unani* doctors, lawyers, and dentists.

Among the twenty-one respondents interviewed in the qualitative phase in Jamia Nagar, five were involved in self-employment in Jamia Nagar and almost half of them expressed a choice for self-employment in the neighbourhood as their future career. Among the ten respondents interviewed in non-segregated neighbourhoods, only one had aspirations for self-employment while the rest aspired for professional jobs. This shows the importance of segregated neighbourhoods in facilitating aspirations and choices for self-employment.

Moreover, 83% of the respondents in the survey phase opined that youth living in Jamia Nagar are located in self-employment. While this section establishes the presence of and aspiration for self-employment in Jamia Nagar, the next section discusses the reasons for the choice of self-employment among Muslim youth in Delhi.

**Reasons for the Choice of Self-Employment**

**Discrimination Against Muslims: Discussions on Marginalisation**

11 percent of the respondents in Jamia Nagar believed discrimination against Muslims in salaried employment to be a reason for the choice of self-employment. As compared to the overarching presence of discrimination cited in the works of Das (2010) and Mhaskar (2018), this percentage appears to be fairly low. When the respondents not engaged in self-employment were asked the same questions about themselves, only 20% said that they faced discrimination in salaried jobs, 80 percent had never faced discrimination in salaried jobs, and this aligns with the findings of another study based on fictional applications by Banerjee et al. (2008). As opposed to Thorat and Attwell’s (2010) study discussed before, Banerjee et al. (2008) report that Muslims were as likely to get a call back as upper-caste Hindus in call centre and software jobs in Delhi, through response to three seventy-one job applications, using fictitious data, showing that discrimination in hiring was not widely prevalent in the city.

As for the narratives, only one respondent said that he faced overt discrimination in salaried work. According to Husain, his colleagues mocked him for keeping a beard, for eating meat, and he was frequently questioned on his views on triple

17 The respondents were asked about discrimination in salaried jobs located outside Jamia Nagar. This question was addressed to only those who ever worked, were working, or looking for work, in salaried jobs outside Jamia Nagar, as the intuitive assumption is that religious discrimination against Muslims would not be common in a segregated neighbourhood.

18 All names are changed.
talakh (divorce) and other Muslim customs. For these reasons, he quit his job and was closed to working outside Jamia Nagar. For two respondents, discrimination was subtle. Shaheen complained about her colleagues being excessively inquisitive when she covered her head for a brief period of time that she cited was for health reasons and Ashraf, a male respondent from non-segregated Delhi, lamented that Eid was the only festival for which celebrations were not held in his office.

Authors highlight that subtle forms of discriminatory attitudes are often ambivalent and ambiguous in nature and are normalised over time and are not reported by people (Jones et al. 2017). It can be speculated that other respondents did not report discrimination as a result. Perhaps older youth also perceive more discrimination, as seen from Husain’s example, who was 34 years old at the time of the interview. We could speculate that perception of discrimination accumulates over time and while brushed aside during younger years, is felt more strongly for older youth, but for now research among Muslims is scant to provide conclusive arguments. Some respondents anticipated discrimination in salaried work but did not eventually face it. Shifa feared that she might be discriminated against during interviews for jobs in the wake of the protests in Jamia Nagar against the CAA, but those fears were allayed and she was hired by the company that she desired to work with.

Taking responses at face value hinders the importance of structural contexts within which these narratives and opinions are shaped. Discrimination is not uniformly faced by all Muslim youth. For instance, the all India youth survey of the CSDS reports that while 13% of Muslim youth faced general discriminatory attitudes in general, as against 5% of youth from all religious backgrounds (Sardesai 2019), among Muslims, certain groups faced more discrimination (ibid). These youth were those who lived in smaller cities (27%), those who were highly religious (22%), and those who were lower class and the poor (16%) (ibid). Since a significant proportion of the respondents in Jamia Nagar are middle-class (as discussed before) and they reside in Delhi, it could have partially explained lower incidents of discrimination against them.

Discrimination was, however, denied by several respondents from relatively marginalised class backgrounds in Delhi. Ruhi, a female respondent who lived in a non-segregated area and whose parents worked as house helps, was initially anxious about facing discrimination at her new workplace as she was the only Muslim employee. Not only was the attitude of her colleagues and seniors highly supportive, but she also received a promotion within two months of her joining, making her experience similar to that of Shifa’s, discussed earlier.

Hashim, a youth from an impoverished background who worked as a labourer to support his family, was of the opinion that discrimination against Muslims was not a significant issue and any obstacle in the path of achievement can be overcome through hard work (see also, Salman 2020). Emphasizing on adequate guidance for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, he cited his example, where he was helped throughout his educational career by leaders of an NGO. Consequently, he was now a post-graduate, looking to enrol in PhD. and aspiring to work as a professor. As discussed before, the neoliberal discourse (Foucault 1972; 1978) on the ease of upward mobility for ordinary Indians is now hegemonic (Gramsci 1971) and is internalised, embodied, and reproduced as doxa (Bourdieu 1998; see Chopra 2003 in the context
of India). This diminishes the perception of discrimination amongst people and provides them the hope (see Berlant 2011; for a discussion of hope in the times of intense precarity) for a good life (Fischer 2014).

Critically, studies highlighting discrimination as the main reason for the choice of self-employment suffer from some limitations. Mhaskar’s (2018) sample size of Muslims is limited; just 36 or 3.9% of the 924 ex-mill workers surveyed were Muslims, and overwhelmingly, the sample was men. The homogeneity of the sample perhaps supported the discrimination thesis. When the sample is more diverse along caste, class, gender, and regional lines, the perspectives can potentially become differentiated, as is the case of Jamia Nagar. Bringing the diversity and ambiguity of Jamia Nagar as a segregated neighbourhood is crucial as several respondents do not view themselves or the neighbourhood as marginalised. These voices are critical as experiences of marginalisation are always relational and contextual as Dickey (2016) would show in her ethnography on class in Tamil Nadu. Marginalisation is interspersed with experiences of connectedness (Chambers 2020) as would be shown in the subsequent sections.

An upper-middle-class male respondent in non-segregated Delhi, Shahrukh, highlights the importance of class when it comes to discrimination. He did not face religious discrimination as being culturally elite; he could ward off many aspects of discrimination; according to him ‘some of it can be English [command over the language], some of it can be the way I talk, so it has been a little easy on me, but it’s not that easy on everyone.’ Indeed, Sharukh has forged transnational networks much like elite Muslims in Jamia Nagar discussed before, dividing his year between Switzerland and India.

Beyond Discrimination: Optimism and Connectedness

The discussions in this section follow from Chambers (2020) work about experiences of connectedness experienced by Muslims through their engagement with and social embeddedness in the local economy of woodwork in Saharanpur. Chambers accounts the relationships forged on social networks that offer a sense of empowerment through resources, support, and care, to the otherwise marginalised Muslim community. Employing a dialectical framework, Chambers shows that connectedness challenges the frequent representation of Muslims as only marginalised. While this paper has engaged with some themes of marginalisation such as spatial segregation of Muslims in Jamia Nagar and their experiences of discrimination in the employment market, it now moves to the challenges offered to such a discourse, which highlights the importance of optimism, hope and connections.

Success and Respectability in Self-Employment

In Jamia Nagar, the youth believed that self-employed owners were viewed with respect, were granted higher social status (also see Chambers 2020), and provided they work hard enough, could earn significantly higher incomes. A small entrepreneur was considered successful in their career (Gooptu 2013), which also made
the youth express a keen interest in self-employment. For instance, Mubin, a male respondent studying engineering said that, ‘in own work, you are the boss and when you work hard all the benefits come directly to you. Your achievements are not shared by others. Your success is your own and so are your failures. You are not answerable to anyone.’

Some youth associated *khud ka kaam* with Islam and as noble work, citing that the Prophet Muhammad was involved in mercantile activities. Similar findings were reported by Muslim male followers of the Tablighi Jamaat in Chambers (2020) work and in Janson’s (2014) work among Jamaat followers in Gambia. A related reason was that Muslims are too proud to be working as employees. For instance, Aliya, a female respondent said that Muslims do not want to take orders from their seniors and therefore prefer to start their own business. Another female respondent Tamanna said that, ‘It is a combination of anger [*gussa*], pride (bordering on hubris) [*ghamand*] and stubbornness [*zid*]. They [Muslims] want to be in charge of their path and destiny’. In the context of salaried work, ‘*doosron ki ghulami nahi karni*’ [do not want to be slaves of other people], was commonly quoted by respondents. These words undergirding potent emotions are contextualised in both the Islamic faith discussed before and the salience of the enterprising self (Gooptu 2013) for gaining success in the neoliberal times.

### Social Networks in Self-Employment

Some respondents in Jamia Nagar narrated that Muslims live in segregated spaces that make their social networks (Lin 1999) for employment limited to only those areas. These social networks were of two types, friendship networks and connections among youth highlighted in the works of Jeffrey 2010, Nisbett (2007) and specifically among Muslims in the works of Osella (2012), Pernau (2017), and Chambers (2020). The second were family networks, capital, and strategies highlighted in the works of Ball (2003), Betelie (1991), Devine (2004), and Donner (2008).

In Jamia Nagar, Muslims, both men and women, felt connected to and socially embedded in their neighbourhood through these networks (Chambers 2020). An overwhelming number of male and some female respondents relied on friendship networks for their business in Jamia Nagar and many had friends as their business partners. For instance, Inayat, a female respondent, started a tiffin business (providing home cooked meals to clients) in Jamia Nagar through assistance provided by a friend whose relatives were in the same business and other respondents narrated similar experiences.

Several men in Jamia Nagar inherited small businesses from the fathers or uncles (in the absence of male children) such as grocery shops, bakeries, clothing and footwear shops, and other shops for varied consumer goods. Becoming business owners through these networks, they felt a sense of empowerment and optimism, similar to what Chambers (2020) documents.

The goodwill and socially embedded relations in Jamia Nagar are captured from Harun’s example, who wanted to start a travel business: ‘On [the weekends] I take people out for a tour to all the famous restaurants in Jamia Nagar. I have been part
of this for the last couple of years and I know that this will be helpful for my business in the future. I found this opportunity because of contacts [networks in Jamia Nagar]. Everyone knows me here and my work gets done easily’.

Class mediated their experiences, however, as friendship networks were limited to similar class groups. Youth from socio-economically weaker backgrounds had limited friendship and family networks to start or inherit businesses and they suffered significant setbacks when it came to fulfilling aspirations for self-employment, instead, often resorting to low-paid insecure jobs in Jamia Nagar (Salman forthcoming).

Safety and Respectability: Women’s Experiences in Self-Employment

Jamia Nagar offered a familiar environment and a Muslim socio-cultural milieu that provided a safe and respectable work environment for the women respondents, thereby attracting them to self-employment in the neighbourhood. Women as business owners were not uncommon among respondents, and importantly, they were exclusively female run enterprises. This reduced the probability of continuous and close proximity at work with male colleagues, which reduced questions around women’s morality and character (see Chambers 2020). Clients in the neighbourhood were often known to families of the women and being located closer home, travel as well as staying back late for work was relatively easier. Consequently, family members from whom permission to work had to often be sought were more supportive of their women working in women run and managed apna kaam. This finding is critical as previous research does not focus much on Muslim women as owners of apna kaam but rather as workers in male owned self-employment, who consequently faced social disapproval (see Chambers 2020). Where it does, the focus is on piece rate work at home that supports the need for following purdah and other restrictions (Bhatt 1987).

Work opportunities in Jamia Nagar for women were often limited to salespersons and receptionist in offices, which were unapproved professions due to long work hours, low pay, and proximity to male colleagues. The only other viable option was low-paid teaching jobs in Jamia Nagar. Therefore, self-employment was the preferred choice of a significant number of women respondents. These reasons were cited by a number of women in diverse professions for choosing self-employment, such as Farhana, who was the owner of a clinic in Zakir Nagar, offering unani medicine; Afia, who was the owner of a boutique for women’s clothing in Batla House; and Inayat (introduced before), who ran a cooked-meal service for residents in Zakir Nagar. While the parents of all three women were initially unsupportive, the security and respect offered by self-employment enabled a change in their attitude.

Several women, however, were struggling to obtain permission to engage in self-employment, as they belonged to families where working women were viewed as directly threatening the family’s honour and prestige (see Das 1976). An example was Rani, a young widow who was not allowed to work by her in-laws even though she worked for some years before marriage. Rani was nevertheless determined to overcome these constraints by starting with piece-rate stitching at home for which
she was not required to venture out, and eventually start her own boutique. Self-employment provided space for agency and negotiation for women living in Jamia Nagar in the face of limited employment opportunities and familial restrictions, embedded in structures of patriarchy (Walby 1989; Acker 1989), which in India is often tied to Brahmanical hegemonic values (Rege 2013). While not subverting gender norms surrounding women’s employment in Jamia Nagar, these challenges were pivotal in terms of questioning them, thereby undergirding the power of agency. These challenges resonate with Mahmood’s theorisation of agency as a ‘capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create’, which she conceptualises through the analysis of Muslim women participants in a mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt (Mahmood 2001: 203). She posits it as an alternative to western conceptions of agency by drawing from the lives of women embedded within ‘nonliberal traditions’ (ibid). Display of a similar notion of agency was highlighted in Kirmani’s (2013) study in Zakir Nagar where women from middle-class Muslim families, who were otherwise not allowed to work, could negotiate with their husbands and in-laws for teaching jobs.

While the women discussed thus far were not strongly opposing familial restrictions but navigating within them, there were others who were willing to break off ties with family members to fulfil their aspirations. An example was Seema, who despite coming from a poor background wanted to become a journalist and was determined to move out of her familial home and enrol in Jamia University, supporting herself financially through part-time jobs.

The narrative around safety in self-employment though widespread was however contested from lower-middle-class women. For instance, Naushin, a female respondent from a low-income family and owner of a grocery store, was attacked and sustained injuries on her head, by the goons of a land mafia who had been threatening to seize her shop. However, Naushin continued to work because she was the only earning member in her family of seven women. Class mediated experience of self-employment for women, because those at the relatively upper ends of the middle-class were able to withdraw when conditions were unfavourable. For instance, Wasima, a tutor, suspended her work in March and April 2020 when India was under the strictest lockdown. When restrictions lifted, she resumed her work and was also considering starting a channel on YouTube that would enable her to target a wider student community for her tuitions. Wasima also believed that the lockdown affected the lower classes and the poor directly as they lost their jobs while people from her class were relatively unaffected.

A contrast is Seema’s (introduced before) example in Batla House, who was desperately trying to make ends meet when her beauty parlour, which barely earned the family of five enough to meet their basic needs, closed down for months because of the restrictions related to the pandemic. There were several other women for whom working in self-employment was really a question of necessity rather than an aspiration or choice. Even so, in Jamia Nagar, women were placed in a significantly better off position than the ethnographies of women exploited in the wood industry in segregated areas in Saharanpur presented by Chambers (2020).
Conclusion

This paper engages with the reasons given by Muslim youth living in the segregated neighbourhood of Jamia Nagar (along with a lesser number of Muslim youth living in non-segregated areas in Delhi), for choosing or aspiring for self-employment activities. While research documents discrimination and marginalisation of Muslims, including in salaried work, pushing them into enclaves of self-employment Das (2010; Mhaskar 2018), other experiences have been relegated as relatively unimportant. One notable exception is Chambers (2020) work in Saharanpur that engages with the experiences of Muslims with marginalisation, but also with connectedness. Following Chambers ethnography, this paper shows that discrimination is indeed experienced by Muslims in salaried jobs located outside segregated neighbourhoods, pushing them into seeking self-employment in the economy of Jamia Nagar. But only discrimination cannot explain the choice and aspiration for self-employment among these youth in Delhi.

The paper discusses the salience of spatial locations, highlighting that Muslim youth living in non-segregated neighbourhoods in Delhi do not aspire for or work in self-employment. Self-employment, was overwhelmingly, an aspiration only for Muslim youth living in Jamia Nagar. If discrimination against Muslims was as powerful, then a push into self-employment would have been documented in the case of Muslim youth in non-segregated areas as well.

Additionally, in the perception of Muslim youth living in Jamia Nagar, the neighbourhood is not overwhelmingly marginalised and displays several contradictions that makes it significantly unique as compared to deprived urban peripheries that are Muslim segregated neighbourhoods (the most extreme being the ghetto of Juhapura, Jaffrelot and Thomas 2012). Living and working in self-employment in Jamia Nagar does not accord youth with simply a sense of discrimination and marginalisation, rather, also instils in them pride, confidence, hope, and optimism. In short, their experiences border on the connections described in Chambers (2020) accounts of woodworkers in Saharanpur.

Class and gender interact with these experiences, complicating them further. The Muslim upper middle-class elite, both men and women, in Jamia Nagar and Delhi, has established itself in professional employment in India and has also utilised transnational networks to study and migrate abroad. They largely do not aspire for self-employment. The class of Muslim youth below the elite upper middle-class expressed the strongest choice and aspiration for self-employment. Several women from middle and lower-middle-class backgrounds see self-employment in Jamia Nagar as their only means of engaging in any form of paid work, thereby presenting them with scope for negotiation and agency (Mahmood 2001). The youth from poor backgrounds among the Muslims, struggle to fulfill aspirations for self-employment, primarily due to the lack of economic resources.

What other aspects account for a reduced perception of discrimination among Muslim middle-class youth in Delhi? Neoliberalism builds a convincingly powerful discourse (Foucault 1972; 1978), which is circulated with the help of the media, curriculum, and other ideological state apparatus (Althusser 1971) and has become...
hegemonic (Gramsci 1971). According to this discourse, the ordinary person is in control of their (successful) destiny, attained through hard work. While there are contestations to this discourse where youth have questioned the importance of education in the wake of underemployment (Jeffrey 2010), it nevertheless remains powerful (Gooptu 2009; Mankekar 2015). This discourse circulated at the expense of the discourse around discrimination and other structural impediments to employment, is internalised, and reflected in practice through the habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) of the youth.

This perhaps diminishes the experiences of discrimination and marginalisations even further. Rather than questioning the importance of education and merit, youth in Jamia Nagar indulge in aggressive means to pursue higher education and have the vision of ‘making it’ (McLeod 2009) in the new economy. One example that exemplifies this pursuit is Hashim, who has struggled throughout his poverty stricken life for upward mobility via the route of education, placing all his faith in merit and hard work.

This paper thereby contributes to the engagement with experiences around employment that extend beyond discrimination and shows the contradictions and contestations that frame experiences of discrimination.

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**Declarations**

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Research Involving Human Participants** This study uses opinions and interviews with people and as per the institutional norms of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India; no ethics approval was required for conducting the field study in Delhi or while submitting the PhD thesis.

**Informed Consent** The participants in the study were adults (between ages 21 years and 34 years), and verbal consent was obtained from each of the participants before interviews.

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