

The fabric of a communal ghetto in India

by Léo Pellerin

What constitutes a ghetto? Zeyad Masroor Khan offers an intimate portrayal of life in a marginalized neighbourhood shaped by persistent communal violence. Writing from Aligarh in North India, he vividly describes the spatial, social, and emotional dimensions of the ghetto.

About: Zeyad Masroor Khan, *City on Fire: a Boyhood in Aligarh*, HarperCollins India, 2023, 312 p.

Earlier this year, on board a domestic flight hovering over India's Gangetic plain, I found myself engrossed in Zeyad Masroor Khan's first book, *City on Fire: a Boyhood in Aligarh* (HarperCollins, 2023). In the seat next to mine sat an elegant elderly gentleman who, as our journey progressed, went on perusing pages over my shoulder with growing intensity and decreasing restraint. This made me uncomfortable. The chapter I was reading offered an exhaustive, bloody description of instances of violence against Muslims in Aligarh, a city located in the state of Uttar Pradesh – a rather explosive topic in contemporary India.

Out of precaution, I closed the book. Much to my neighbour's dismay. As it happened, he was himself a Muslim from Aligarh, and he wanted to read more. He seemed amazed that the author was Indian: *'I did not know it was still possible for Indian Muslims to publish such things.'* Zeyad Masroor Khan provides evidence that this is indeed possible, and also tremendously important.

Writing from the epicentre of Hindu-Muslim violence

Khan is not an academic scholar, but his publication is certainly relevant for the study of urban segregation and communal violence. A journalist by training, he grew up in “*the U.K.*” – not in the United Kingdom, but in Upar Kot, a Muslim ghetto of Aligarh. Not only that: his family’s house was situated at a very strategic corner, bang on the borderline separating the Muslim-dominated area from the Hindu one. In cities plagued by a long history of communal tension, such as Aligarh, these buffer zones often become the epicentre of riots, a phenomenon extensively documented by political scientist Paul Brass. This is exactly what got to witness Khan, now in his mid-thirties: living on the edge offered him an unparalleled vantage point to observe three decades of spasmodic waves of inter-religious clashes.

In *City on Fire*, Khan provides a vivid memoir of how it feels to spend a childhood in a ghetto prone to violent communal turmoil. The author offers first-hand testimony of the “*trauma*” (p. 255) he experienced: the frightening assault of his school bus by an enraged mob, the killing of boys he knew, the sight of seemingly harmless Hindu shopkeepers joining hands with rioters, the normalisation of brutality. The theme of the book is austere, for sure. Yet the tone adopted by Khan is unexpectedly light and humorous. Khan, who manipulates self-deprecation with acid flair, regals readers with darkly comedic tales – like when, as a ten-year-old boy, he had to overcome deeply ingrained fears to venture incognito deep into the Hindu zone to purchase comic books, vilified as “*the pinnacle of vice*” in his Muslim part of town (p. 55).

Although the narration focuses on Khan’s adventures, the genuine hero – and at times villain – of the book is perhaps Aligarh itself, a city of 1.25 million inhabitants. Khan has affection for his hometown, but the text he produced is not exactly a love letter; or if it is, it comes with a major post-scriptum full of irritation – “[*Aligarh*], a city I loved but hoped to leave forever behind” (p. 232). In Khan’s writings, the city looks like an endearing but terribly embarrassing friend. Its inhabitants are entertaining, witty and colourful but also deeply patriarchal, parochial, and over-smart, as summarised by this observation: “*If Neil Armstrong would have stepped into Civil Lines [a locality of Aligarh] rather than on the moon, he’d have definitely run into too Aligarhians giving him lessons on good astronauting*” (p. 186).

Aligarh is also schizophrenic. While Muslims and Hindus do intermingle quotidianly in multiple ways, they can also turn violent overnight. Khan, for instance,

recalls the awkward moment when his mother sent him to a Hindu shop to purchase spices (p. 150). Only a few months prior, Khan had witnessed the shopkeeper's son participating in a ferocious mob attack: "*The boy who had wanted me to be killed was sitting at the shop. I gave him the paper with the lists of groceries. He took it, looked at it and then began to take pages out of a notebook and pack spices in them*". Amazingly, everyone behaved as if nothing had happened: "*His father asked how my father was doing. I told him Papa had been well. In Aligarh, everything was back to normal. Until the next time*".

Of bricks and emotions: a personal account of what a ghetto is made of

The major strength of *City on Fire* is that Khan makes us *feel* the ghetto. Rather than a social phenomenon (Khan's family is actually rather economically privileged), the ghetto is primarily a spatial experience. Upar Kot – "*the Pakistan of Aligarh*", as one of Khan's Hindu schoolmates once described it (p. 186) – is a kind of blot on the city's map. Abandoned by the state – as illustrated by the absence of health facilities, ATMs or proper lighting – it is in even more squalid conditions than equally poor Hindu localities. The peculiarity of the ghetto is also architectural. The neighbourhood, for instance, features *chor galis* (literally thief lanes), which consist of hidden narrow staircases built for Muslim residents of Hindu areas to escape and take refuge in Upar Kot during riots.

But the ghetto is not just physical; it is also in the mind. Khan eloquently describes the layers of mistrust, resentment and fear that each new wave of violence silts over both Hindus' and Muslims' hearts, generating a sentiment of "*self-imposed exile that makes communities living in harmony with each other for centuries, insular and uninviting toward each other*" (p. 153). Khan's voice is raw and candid, often borrowing the language of his younger, tormented self – at the risk of sounding harsh. Traumatized by the violence he witnessed from his window, juvenile Khan for instance refers to Hindus as "*evil forces*" (p. 51) and hesitates to eat food served in their homes (p. 62).

Later, as a teenager, while confronted with rising anti-Muslim sentiments in both the classroom and in the media, Khan develops an intense feeling of injustice. This translates into fervent religiosity that, in turn, earns him the reputation of "*closet jihadi and troublemaker*" (p. 113). For a school essay about his role model, he

provocatively chooses to write about Osama Bin Laden (although Khan cheekily specifies he had hesitated with Mother Teresa) – “*I didn’t foresee how badly this stance would age in time, but back then, it sounded like the right thing to believe in*” (p. 108).

Can one ever escape the ghetto?

Khan’s testimony is also about attempting to leave the ghetto. As his life progresses, Khan physically manages to get away from Upar Kot – thanks to his family’s advantageous status, he attends a private school in a more privileged part of the city, later studies at the prestigious Aligarh Muslim University, and finally moves to Delhi for his masters and his first job. Page after page, we witness his transformation. As his circles of friends and the range of his readings expand, his tastes, beliefs, and views of the world evolve. Khan becomes more open-minded and less confrontational – although he still resents the narrow Muslim identity his progressive Hindu friends corner him into.

In Delhi, Khan lives comfortably in a Hindu residential locality. Communal tensions that formed the pattern of his life in Aligarh now seem far away. Yet, when riots suddenly erupt in different parts of Delhi in 2019, Khan is once again taken over by fears he thought he had left behind. His “*faux-friendly*” neighbours now appear threatening: “*Delhi, my home for a decade, was now a dangerous city for my frightened mind, where everyone was a potential killer whose conscience had numbed*” (p. 262). Haunted by the ghosts of his childhood, Khan decides to literally run away and move to Jamia Nagar – a well-known Muslim-majority area of the Indian capital. A Muslim ghetto, all over again. The circle is complete.

What antidote to communal polarisation?

In the last section of the book, Khan abandons his humorous panache and adopts a gloomier tone. For, he believes, the situation is “*becoming more sinister*” (p. 273). Khan alerts about the mounting trust deficit that is increasingly poisoning the relations between Hindus and Muslims, especially in smaller cities like Aligarh. In this context, he mentions the influence of the ideology which brought Primer Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power. For instance, he evokes the

insistent demands emanating from Hindu nationalist groups to rechristen *Aligarh* (literally “the abode of Ali”) into *Harigarh* (“the abode of Hari, that is Vishnu”) – a name proposal which was nothing but a joke a decade ago but is now becoming a source of tension.

Some readers might regret that *City on Fire* does not examine in greater detail the responsibility of the regime in the current state of affairs. However, that is not the point; the book is not a diatribe against Modi. Instead, Khan addresses a reality – everyday communalism in India – which is in fact far from being new, as his childhood memories repeatedly remind us. The book also avoids resorting to one-sided victimhood. Although Khan clearly underlines that (poor) Muslims are disproportionately victims of inter-faith violence, he also makes sure to give space to families of Hindus killed by Muslim rioters.

The conclusion of the book is a thoughtful and emotional reflection on a possible antidote to communal polarisation – friendship. In Aligarh, intimate and convivial ties between Hindus and Muslims are commonplace. Khan’s first assessment is somehow depressing; he is aware that friendship is not an infallible shield against violence: “*However nice everyone might come across, they’d change colours as soon as a clash broke out*” (p. 62).

And yet, Khan asserts, inter-faith bonds remain essential. The last pages of the book feature him visiting old Hindu friends from his hometown, as to underline the importance of maintaining bridges. The book argues that displaying affection for each other can go a long in countering hate– whether through the nurturing of close ties of friendship, or through simple gestures to neighbours and strangers such as “*extending umbrellas during sudden rains*” (p. 288). Khan concludes that “*we, as a society, are in dire need to go back to these small acts of kindness*”, particularly towards “*those we perceive as our enemy*” (p. 291). In other words, friendship alone is not enough, but we cannot do without it.

Further readings

- Paul Brass (2005). *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, University of Washington Press
- Juliette Gallonier (2015). ‘The Enclave, The Citadel and the Ghetto: The Threefold Segregation of Upper-Class Muslims in India’, in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Volume 39, Issue 1

- Laurent Gayer (2011). 'Safe and Sound: Searching for a 'Good Environment' in Abul Fazl Enclave, Delhi', in *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, Columbia University Press, 2011

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