

Kalyani Devaki Menon, *Making Place for Muslims in Contemporary India*.  
Cornell University Press, 2022, xiii+191 pp., \$125 (Hard Cover). ISBN: 9781501760587.

Kalyani Devaki Menon's book, 'Making Place for Muslims in Contemporary India', is rich in ethnographical details of perplexity faced by the shifting realities of the everyday life of Muslims in contemporary Delhi, India. The book is an essential and timely scholarly intervention in times of proactive debates which cast the Indian Muslims as "others". The book seeks to put forth one of the most ardent questions of our times, 'How do we treat our religious minorities?' It examines place-making mannerisms adopted by the Muslims from the point of view of the state apparatus, building upon the notions of securitisation and the intimate daily interactions from the intra-religious point of view. From the title, one might feel that the book is about the state of Muslims in India, but it considers the diverse Muslim communities living in the walled complex of Old Delhi. Nevertheless, it can be said that the book represents a larger discourse in which the condition of Muslims across India may be understood.

The book draws upon the multiple material forces like the violence of Partition, increasing political and economic marginalisation and anti-Muslim violence that dominate the socio-political landscape of contemporary India. Menon argues that "Old Delhi's Muslims construct self and community amid these competing hegemonies, and religion is not the only framework through which they understand their lives". In her ethnography, Menon has amalgamated Muslims in all their diverse manifestations which include Sunnis and Shias, Sufis and atheists, Barelvis and Deobandis, Ahl-e-Hadis Muslims and others who refuse to be identified by *Maslak* (path). In analysing the diverse set of groups through religious practice and narrative of self and community as a form of the political in her study, she further demonstrates the place-making strategies co-opted by the Muslims, which pose as a challenge to the majoritarian, exclusionary and introverted tendencies in contemporary India.

The book is thematically divided into two parts. The first part, 'Landscape of inequality', is divided into two chapters, where the author draws conjectures to trace the links between Muslim placemaking, first, from the perspective of differential citizenship apparatus and second, from the gendered precarity perspective arising from jobless neoliberal growth in India.

The first chapter, 'A place for Muslims', captures the constructions of Muslim subjectivities in the urban margins. It examines how the resident Muslims negotiate insecurity in everyday life and create a sense of belonging in modern India. This chapter presents a variety of episodes from the daily lives of the interlocutors, which capture the anxieties and insecurities they felt in carrying themselves as Muslims outside Old Delhi and the emergence of Old Delhi as a Muslim locality in that process. Here she describes various attributes such as place-making acts, eschewing personal sartorial preferences, and changing names and practices, which the Delhi Muslims use to deal with differential citizenship treatments inflicted by the dominant Hindu right-based security apparatus in modern India. In doing so, the author reiterates the increasingly dominant Hindu right enforcing existing hierarchies, the logic of containment, religious privilege and an understanding of the nation.

The second chapter, 'Gender and Precarity', is positioned to advance the impact of jobless neoliberal growth and state-induced precarity through economic reforms like demonetisation and GST on the already economically underprivileged Muslim women in Old Delhi. The chapter has used narratives of zardozi artisans, small-scale jobs in global commodity chains and sex work. It shows how women use their considerable skills, strategies and resourcefulness to cope with the induced labour and, in due process, have created a network and exchanges to support their families.

The second part of the book, 'Making Place', looks at the Muslim place-making practices from within the community and highlights the degrees of convergence and divergence within the diverse Muslim cultures and traditions in Old Delhi. It contains three chapters. The third chapter of the book, 'Perfecting the Self', examines the constructions of Muslim subjectivities and how they draw on movements and conversations among Muslims worldwide to articulate their views on good Muslims. In

an attempt to keep up with Islamic revivalism, it is interesting to note how women participating in the *Dawa*-Muslim club use the internet to understand the views of famous Islamic scholars like Zakir Naik and Farhat Hashmi in articulating ideas of Islam on rituals, traditions and discourses. The author has used their discussions on death rituals, *Purdah* practices and traditions associated with the worship of *Sufis* and saints to eloquently show the attempts of self-making practices making a place for themselves in India and the world.

In the fourth chapter, 'Living with the difference', Menon explores the religious and sectarian differences between the Shias and the Sunnis during Muharram in Old Delhi. She argues that the sectarian discourses around Muharram enable forms of identity that challenge exclusionary community constructions and allows Old Delhi's diverse community to live with difference in contemporary India. Drawing from the martyrdom of Hussain, the author shows how the mourning tradition in the month of Muharram evokes sectarian differences among the Muslims in Old Delhi. It shows how the Shias of Old Delhi embrace the difference to forge cultural commonalities.

In the fifth and the last chapter of the book, 'Life after Death', the author uses death as a device to understand both the intersection and the differences to examine how death is also about life- of the widow, of the bereaved and of the communities they belong to. It also examines the tenacious articulations of Islam and Muslim identity beyond Old Delhi. The debates around Talal Asad's (1986) discursive tradition are at the heart of this chapter's debate. It presents a stark image of the alternative forms of subjectification beyond Old Delhi and shows how notions of locality emerge from the varying self-practices through such rituals of belonging.

The book reflects a careful and diligent effort on the author's part. It closely examines the effects of the Hindu majoritarian notions on Muslims. It also accounts for the internal dynamics between the Muslim sects, which challenges the Middle-East centric scholarship of the Muslim world and the Hindu-centric view of India. In writing, a strict critical tone used to refer the present government might disturb some potential readers. However, it successfully conveys the anxiety and distress among Muslims in the everyday context. In contextualising debates around the state of Muslims, particularly in

India and broadly in South Asia generating new perspectives and opening up avenues for further inquiry, this book makes a pivotal contribution to studies of Muslims in contemporary India. The book will serve academicians from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, urban studies, economics, political science, gender studies, and religion in South Asia to comprehend the understanding of Muslims in today's urban Delhi in particular and India in general from a fresh perspective. The jargon-free writing style and the use of conversational data as ethnographic indexes within the chapters make this book persuasive for anyone genuinely interested in reading this book.

Nikhil Kaithwas  
PhD Scholar  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007  
Email: [nikhil.anthro.du@gmail.com](mailto:nikhil.anthro.du@gmail.com)