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Feminist counter-authoritarian political agency: Muslim girls re-generating politics in India

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on 'voices' of Muslim girls reported in a purposive sample of media, this research presents Muslim girls' responses to the impossible choice between right to education and vs. religion, following the hijab ban in the colleges in Karnataka, India. Their narratives do not fit conventional understandings of 'being' political or 'doing' politics. Instead, they are situated in a continuum of new-forms of political protest and agency emerging among young Muslim women in India following nation-wide Muslim women-led protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (2020). Muslim girls' voices in this research suggest their attempts to regenerate democracy by offering an alternative political vision of India to the authoritarian vision currently in power. This paper suggests that to understand Muslim girls' political agency in authoritarian and Hindu majoritarian India there is a need to recalibrate our understanding of politics and political agency.

Introduction

It is useful to start this paper with a few images as visual prompts that have come to define the relationship between Muslim women and girls and the Indian State in recent years. A widely circulated image from Government PU College in Kundapur, Karnataka in February 2022 powerfully depicts both the real and metaphorical gates of education closing on Muslim girls. The image shows a group of Muslim girls sitting outside the gate of the college with their books open under the watchful eyes of the Indian State embodied by the police officers (Khurshid, 2022). This image captures Muslim girls' resisting their exclusion from the college, following a newly imposed ban on wearing hijabs in state-funded institutions in the state of Karnataka, India in early 2022. The ban was widely protested by Muslims and progressive groups. It is seen as part of the story of erasure of Muslims and other minorities from India's public spaces (Hussain, 2022). A second striking image is from a viral video of a lone hijabi young woman, identified as Muskan Khan, riding a scooter into her college in Mandya district of Karnataka. She is seen being heckled by a mob of young saffron[1] clad men shouting *Jai*

Shri Ram,[2] leading Muskan to shout back *Allahu Akbar*[3] as she raises her fist in defiance (DNA India News, 2022; Khan, 2022). And finally, a third image from the anti-CAA protests of 2020–21 -a group of Muslim women holding the national flag and a portrait of B.R.Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution and symbol of the Dalit[4] political resistance in India (Ara, 2022). In addition to the powerful symbolism around resistance to the authoritarian Indian State, these images also incapsulate new forms of protests embodied by gendered and minoritised India-Muslim women and girls, the subjects of the current paper. These three images described above disrupt the invisibility of Muslim women and girls from colonial and nationalist histories of India (Sarkar, 2001; Hasan & Menon, 2004), and from education policy (Hussain, 2019). Yet, their "apparent difference (read: backwardness/ conservatism) from the ideal modern (i.e. Hindu middleclass/ upper caste) women" remains rigidly embedded in popular consciousness (Sarkar, 2001, p.226). This is consistent with Joly and Wadia's (2017) research findings in England, France, and the West more broadly, that Muslim women are not seen as political subjects in their own right but more as an accessory to the 'dangerous' Muslim man. However, in India, when Muslim women's

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[1] Colour historically associated with Hindu monks/ascetics. More recently associated with political Hinduism/Hindutwa espoused by Hindu nationalist organisations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and currently ruling party Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP)

[2] Translated to Victory to Lord Ram: "But while this seemingly harmless phrase originated as a pious declaration of devotion in India, it is today increasingly deployed not only as a Hindu chauvinist slogan but also as a threat to anyone who dares to challenge Hindu supremacy". See https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/13/jai-shri-ram-india-hindi/

[3] Allah/God is the greatest

[4] Formerly un-touchable castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy

political agency does come to light, they are labelled as dangerous (Hussain, 2022). Using the recent hijab ban in Karnataka as a case study situated within the wider purview of Muslim women's recent protests in India, this paper calls for a re-conceptualisation of Muslim girls' political agency in the face of authoritarianism in India. This type of agency, I argue, attempts to counter the State's Hindu supremacist, violent and blatant anti-minority conceptions of politics.

In early 2022, hijabi Muslim girl students were denied entry to Government Girls PU College, Udupi, Karnataka, on the grounds that their attire was a violation of the college's uniform policy ("A Timeline,", 2022). Soon, other schools and colleges across the state followed suit, with groups of Hindu students staging counter-protests with demands to wear saffron scarves. A Government of Karnataka order (Karnataka, 2022) codified this exclusion by empowering colleges to determine acceptable forms of uniform. The college authorities and far-right political outfits such as Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Sri Ram Sene, and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) framed it as an issue of uniform dress code and the protection of 'secular' education. The official position was couched in the language of an enlightened uniformity, supported by the Hindu majority in contrast to a regressive Muslim community holding on to patriarchal practices. Further hijabi girls were framed as the 'dangerous' other to a Hindu nation (Hussain, 2022). This pits Muslim girls' religious right to wear a hijab against their right to education - the false binary of *hijab v. kitab*. The Karnataka High Court's (HC) judgement in Resham v. Karnataka "upheld the Government Order that allowed for restriction on hijab"(PUCL, 2023, p.1) when one of the girls affected by the ban tried to take legal recourse. The court ruled that "wearing the hijab is **not** essential religious practice in Islam and freedom of religion under Article 25 of the Constitution is subject to reasonable restrictions (such as school uniform in this case)". Following the unfavourable judgement from the Karnataka HC, the girls took their case to the highest court in the country, the Supreme Court (SC), which offered an inconclusive 'split' verdict with one of the judges upholding the order of the lower court directing hijab ban in State-run institutions, and the other upholding the girls' right to education and freedom of religion in a democratic polity. While the judgement itself, and the structural processes of Muslim girls' educational exclusion are pressing issues of research and forms the backdrop of this study, this paper attends to the far less apparent issue of Muslim girls' political agency in the light of educational exclusion and cultural erasure. In a context when political representation of Muslims in general is at its lowest in post-independent India, how do girls located at the intersection of multiple marginalities (class, gender, religion, location, age) enact political actions? I understand political agency as "acting on political, economic and social structures in order to promote social change" (Kaun, 2016, p. 2) or as "capacity to make a difference" (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). Understood this way, political agency and the social change it seeks are both contextual and constantly negotiated. In that context, communication practices directed towards political change and negotiation with structures and institutional political actors, are critical to understanding political agency and action in a highly digitised and mediatised age (Kaun, 2016). As such, my focus on Muslim girls' voice in this paper should be viewed as part of researching communication practices embedded in enactment of political agency.

The insights presented in this paper are situated at the intersection of scholarly areas such as Youth Studies, Girlhood Studies, and Gender Studies with a focus on agency and political participation. I argue that there is a need to recalibrate our understanding of politics and political agency to view Muslim girls' as political actors and to understand their political agency within an authoritarian, Hindu majoritarian state. This has ramifications for understanding women's and girls' political agency and actions, specifically in the oppressive authoritarian contexts. I contend that Muslim girls' performances of voice outlined in the paper

may not fit conventional understandings of 'being' political or 'doing' politics that rest largely on certain types of 'actions' seen as resistive and/or related to formal political institutions. Instead, these protests signal a new form of political agency among young Muslim women in India that rests on their experiences of loss and fear as minoretised citizens, their understanding of the significance of the symbolism around hijab, and their conception of the constitutionally guaranteed citizenship rights to religious freedom as well as education. In doing so, Muslim girls regenerate Indian democracy by offering an alternative political vision of India (and being Indian) to the dominant authoritarian vision. This paper makes an original contribution to the literature gender and political protest by suggesting that this alternative vision forwarded by Muslim girls rests on a feminist counter-authoritarian political agency. Such an agency is further characterised as diverse, as resting on personal experiences of Muslim girls including navigation of perceptions around Muslim girls' dressing and is underpinned by civic ideals of equality and citizenship rights provided in the Constitution of India.

This paper starts with a discussion of research methods. In particular I start with an explanation of what I mean by 'voice' and how does one go about doing the "hearing". This section also comments on the matter of hearing voices of Muslim girls mediated by mainstream media. The next section maps out some of the ways in which girls and politics have been imagined in the girlhood studies scholarship to highlight the location of girls, especially minoritised girls, as political subjects. I then go on to map the feminist counter-authoritarian political agency of Muslim women in India, following the widespread national protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2020 led by Muslim women. I then move to extend this understanding of feminist counterauthoritarian political agency from the anti-CAA protest and link it to the hijab protests in Karnataka. A major theme that emerges from 'hearing' Muslim girls' voices about the hijab ban in Karnataka is the refusal to be drawn into the hijab v. *kitab* binary. I identify four key themes emerging from Muslim girls' narratives. First, in the face of authoritarian/ethno-centric backlash, Muslim girls situate their actions within the wider context of loss and fear of violence experienced by India's Muslim citizens. Second, they not only consistently de/re signify the *hijab* itself merely as a piece of cloth but also essential to their right to freedom of religion. Third, Muslim girls (and their families) show diverse circumstances and motivations in their educational trajectories. Finally, Muslim girls in this research use their commitment to the constitutional values and civic citizenship as a way to challenge the State's "vigilante citizenship" (Kadiwal, 2021). The paper then concluded by mapping out the contours of new understanding of politics and political agency.

Methodological and ethical perspectives: The 'work' of hearing mediated voices

Methodologically this paper focuses on Muslim girls' voices to understand their political agency. This focus on voice helps address concerns around "action-bias" in Western feminist conceptions of agency or the focus on women's "ability to perform 'free acts'" as a proof of critical consciousness" (Madhok, 2013, p. 106). Drawing on Madhok (2013), this paper shifts its theoretical gaze away from overt actions to an "analysis of critical reflections, motivations, desires, and aspects of our [Muslim girls'] ethical activity", drawing upon the speech practices in their voice (p. 106). In the authoritarian and oppressive institutional contexts wherein committing to particular kinds of actions can be unsafe for individuals, such non-insistence on free action from Muslim girls is essential to capture articulations of injustices, resistance, and negotiations. In social research, the intention of highlighting marginalised voices is to signal that their concerns are included in discussions. It is assumed that such a move helps in equalising the playing field, so that the dominant voices don't monopolise the conversation. However,

nuances such as what constitutes 'voice', whose voices are fore-grounded, whose are made inaudible, and the content of the voices remains unexplored. However, devoid of the "work of hearing" on the part of listeners, there remains a danger that these "voices become a mere add-on" (Khoja-Moolji, 2016, p. 746). As such, my listening practice has been shaped by a commitment to the "work of hearing" that calls on the listener to attend to narrative seepages from dominant codes, and the multiplicity of their investments, commitments and visions of a good life voiced (Khoja-Moolji, 2016, p. 746).

I take that Muslim girls' speech acts as the textual production of their voices and listen (and watch) for the ways in which Muslim girls express their experiences, their citizenship, and their political agency in the shadow of authoritarianism. Specifically, I turn towards interviews of Muslim girls (in Hindi and English) in popular media in the wake of the hijab protests and the subsequent ban, as an instance of their voice performance. I use interviews in English language newspapers (*Deccan Herald, Indian Express, New Indian Express*), and independent and corporate owned online news platforms (*Wire, Quint, India Today, DNA, BBC Hindi*) in the period between January 2022 and May 2023. Of these media sources, there were five videos (*DNA, India Today, Quint, BBC Hindi*) with one or more interviews with Muslim girls. Notably, the two short documentaries, made by *Quint,* had multiple interviews with Muslim girls documenting their lived experiences of the hijab ban in Karnataka. Some of the stories, like that of the Karnataka state topper or the girl who shouted '*Allahu Akbar*' appeared in numerous news stories due to their viral nature. Though beyond the purview of this paper Muslim girls' voices that went 'viral' on social media followed the popular templates of the good Muslim girl (who reject the hijab for education) and the bad Muslim girl (who express strong religious identity). Notably, with the exception of *BBC Hindi,* all the news outlets in this research are in English, with *Quint* and *Wire* being the only independent news outlet in the sample. Overall there were five videos, and four newspaper articles included in the sample of media sources used in this paper. Methodologically, when sampling, I started by looking at English and Kannada (local language) media sources. However, following my research, it was found that the Kannada media's reporting of the issue was deeply biased and Islamophobic. In fact, PUCL (2023, p.89) strongly criticises the Kannada vernacular media for "weaponising the camera" and acting as "vigilante". Further, PUCL (2023) notes that the Kannada media disturbingly presented the "Muslim students' articulations around the hijab as seeking special and irrational treatment" and "failed to provide the relevant socio-historical context" wherein Muslim students have been wearing hijabs and attending educational institutions for decades. As such, the Kannada media played an active part in the dangerous framing of hijabi students as "law breakers." Since the vernacular media's openly stated position on this issue countered this papers' focus on Muslim girls' voices, I decided ultimately to not include any mainstream Kannada media sources in my sample on ethical grounds. Even though the English-language news media is smaller as compared to the vernacular press, this research relied mainly on them due to their disproportionate impact on the public sphere. The purchasing power and high status of its audiences, and the global reach of English language gives English language news organisations a higher status in India's news ecology (Abhishek, 2022; Paul & Palmer, 2022). The English language news organisations also have greater ability to fight legal battles and advocate for itself as compared to the vernacular press. Simultaneously, the Indian news media have faced increasing pressure to toe the government line since the ascent of the Narendra Modi-led BJP to power. According to Reporters Sans Frontiers (2021), "The pro-government media pump out a form of propaganda, journalists who dare to criticise the government are branded as 'anti-state', 'anti-national', or even 'pro-terrorist' by supporters of the ruling [BJP]". Observers note a pervasive climate of pro-government media bias in India with many mainstream media outlets enjoying a symbiotic relationship with the government and amplifying hate speech against religious minorities and critics of the government (Mohan, 2021; Sinha, 2021). In the lead up to the hijab ban in Karnataka, and in its aftermath, a majority of

the mainstream English news channels associated Muslim girls' demands to continue wearing hijabs to colleges to Islamist/Jihadi ideology. The context of demonisation of Muslim girls' (and Muslim's in general) visible religiosity and eroding media independence shaped my methodological decisions in this research. As such, I was not pursuing 'objective' media accounts, instead, I looked for stories that reported Muslim girls' voices on the hijab in Karnataka substantively and offered contextual accounts of the debate instead of just amplifying the government's position. I also scrutinised these media sources through their other content and reporting on the issue of the hijab ban to make sure that their reporting on the issue consistently showed a commitment to Muslim girls' perspectives. Despite my deeply considered choice of mainstream news outlets reporting on the issue, one of the limitations of this methodological approach is that I was hearing Muslim girls' voices mediated by the media. Media scholar Nick Couldry uses the term "mediation" to express fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media (e.g., press, broadcast radio, television, and world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life (Couldry, 2008, p. 11). Mediation requires us to "understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them". In that sense, Muslim girls' mediated voices in this research are akin to "storylines of self" (Hussain, 2019, p. 93) where the storytellers are important actors in the story and not just commentators. They have stakes in the story being told, and hence they hold valuable situated knowledge. Storylines here are understood as "discourses that Muslim girls have access to" in order to frame counter-hegemonic narratives. Therefore, despite possible methodological limitations of the mediated voices of Muslim girls, this approach offers the novel possibility of hearing Muslim girls' voices within a wider contemporary media ecology in India which seeks to erase their issues and concerns using troupes like terrorism, *love jihad,*[5] anti-nationalism, etc.

Girls and political agency

Youth scholars across the Western world have been concerned about young people's lack of political participation as a sign of a crisis in democracy. Most frame this as a general disinterest among young people in politics and political processes (Henn, 2014) resulting in a "democratic deficit" (Norris, 2011, p. 5). However, critical youth scholars have called for a more comprehensive conceptualisation of politics to understand the range of political activities young people engage in (Pickard & Bessant, 2018). Empirical research suggests that less institutionalised forms of political engagement (Gallant, 2018; Muniglia, 2012) are increasingly more popular among young people than traditional forms of youth politics structured around mainstream politics.

Girlhood scholars have shown us that the figure of a girl is of a particular discursive significance in contemporary political and social life (Aapola, 2004; Hussain, 2019; Taft, 2011). Literature identifies three discursive positions available to girls. Firstly, the relatively privileged, predominantly White Western/ Westernised, "can-do girl" distinguished by capacities of becoming autonomous, and responsible for her own well-being. Conceptualised "primarily as consumer citizens" (Harris, 2004, p. 63), these girls are seen as exemplars of this new citizenship in media campaigns such as the Nike Foundation's *Girl Effect*. This can be viewed as a post-feminist discourse on girls where gender equality has been achieved. Secondly, immigrant and/or racialised and minoretised girls are constructed as symbols of 'acculturation' into the dominant norm (Aapola, 2004, p. 180). For instance, in popular Indian media, Muslim girls often register in positive light when seen acculturating

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[5] **Love jihad** is an Islamophobic conspiracy theory promoted by right wing Hindutva activists. It suggests that Muslim men target Hindu women for conversion to Islam by means such as deception, kidnapping, and marriage, as part of a broader demographic "war" by Muslims against India (Adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_jihad_conspiracy_theory)

Hindu religio-cultural norms like learning the Bhagwat Gita[6] ("Muslim Girl,", 2015), learning Sanskrit, reciting shlokas and so on (Tewari, 2022). In such contexts, girls are presented "as the cultural ambassador, more able to change and adapt than her older counterparts" towards the dominant cultural norms (Taft, 2014, p. 260). Thirdly, the Girl Effect paradigm that views girls from the Global South, especially when educated, as the key to a range of problems ranging from population control to counter-terrorism to poverty alleviation and literacy (Khoja-Moolji, 2018). While girls are increasingly celebrated as important social and political actors, Taft (2014) points out that recognised models of engagement available to girls are limited to ones that are individualised, de-politicised, and rooted in neoliberal notions of personal responsibility. Further, in all these discursive locations, girls' agency is seen to be dissociated from expressions of 'victimhood' and associated firmly with expressions of 'resistance'. Rosalind Gill (2007) likens this to an agency pendulum that make it impossible for girls to be recognised as agents whilst claiming to be adversely affected by power structures. To think about Muslim girls in this research, I find Harris and Dobson's (2015, p. 153) analytical corrective of "suffering actor" a useful in capturing both experiences of injustice and actions towards social change or political agency.

White girls in the Global North are already seen to be exercising agency in post-feminist girl power context, while the agential nature of minoretised girls in the West and girls from the Global South is contingent upon their actions perceived to be 'resistance' (or not). In these contexts, girls' desires for freedom and their political actions are "reduced to resistance against local practices" (Khoja-Moolji, 2015, p. 549). In the case of Muslim girls, their agency is registered only when seen to be opposing gender norms in their own communities, and not when opposing wider injustices as in the case of Malala Yousafzai thats acknowledged by many. Therefore, doing the "work of hearing" Muslim girls' voices and their multiplicity of contexts is essential to my reading of their political agency.

New forms of politics, political agency, and protest in India

Before considering Muslim girls' political agency in the hijab ban case, it is important to highlight the newly emerging forms of political agency in the context of India's slide to authoritarianism. In December 2019, the Government of India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which makes religion the basis for granting citizenship to minorities except for Muslims. Together with a nationwide citizenship verification process (National Register of Citizens), aimed at identifying "illegal migrants," the CAA casts a shadow of doubt around the citizenship of India's largest minority. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has expressed concerns about "a risk of statelessness" for India's minorities ("Citizen Amendment,", 2020). Unsurprisingly, the legislation was met with widespread opposition across India, referred to as the anti-CAA protests. These protests were characterised by young Muslim women's active participation and leadership, including many first-time public protest participants (Contractor, 2021). The protests deployed a range of creative forms of resistance towards the repressive response of the authoritarian state. This included peaceful sit-ins with slogans, poetry, music, and street theatre that were at times met with physical confrontation by the police to shield male protestors as well the arrest and custodial torture of Muslim women. Seemingly everyday tasks like reading of the constitution, poetry, music, art, and so on were transformed by Muslim women to political acts. Leila Kadiwal (2021) says that these protests "disrupted the mainstream perception of subaltern

Muslim women who lack public voice and agency" (p. 1).

One of the many enduring images emerging from the CAA protests is that of a Muslim woman holding the national flag and a portrait of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. As part of the CAA protests, the public readings of the Constitution by visibly Muslim women had an important symbolic function of evoking the citizenship rights of the minorities and their national belonging. These protests led by Muslim women can be viewed as "feminist public pedagogy" that offers a powerful rebuttal of the violent and exclusionary "vigilante citizenship" advanced by the Indian state (Kadiwal, 2021). Fahad Hashmi (2022) shows this public pedagogy helped the protesting women in educating themselves and others about citizenship rights embedded in the Constitution. In doing so, these women modelled what "an anti-oppressive public citizenship education looked like, against the backdrop of rising hyper-nationalism" (Kadiwal, 2021, p. 1). Such a public pedagogy of protest is distinct in its ethos (care and nurturing, reflected also in community kitchen to feed protesters), political expressions (through sloganeering, political and civic debates and discussions), educational strategies (using public reading rooms, libraries, and collective reading of the constitution), and artistic expressions (spaces for art, music, poetry, and so on). This new type of protest can be seen as exemplifying Pnina Werbner's conception of feminisation of citizenship whereby women's gendered concerns (as carers, wives, mothers, etc.) permeate larger debates around citizenship, belonging and even political action. This reconstitutes traditionally masculine conceptions of citizenship "in terms of qualities associated with women's role as nurturers, carers and protectors of the integrity of the family and its individual members" (Werbner, 1999, p. 222). Considering the CAA protests through the lenses of feminisation of citizenship and of public pedagogy of education allows us to map the emergence of a new type of political agency— one that is rooted in the gendered-minoretised experiences of Muslim women, yet committed to the civic ideal of equality for all in the constitution. Following Werbner's theorisation of political motherhood and the feminisation of citizenship, it is perhaps useful to think of the anti-CAA movement as Muslim women led counter-authoritarian "political community" (Werbner, 1999, p. 221). Shaheen Bagh's[7] Bilkis Dadi frames women's' political role outside home as an extension of their maternal role, by saying "Men tell us to stay at home and cook [...] I like to cook and I am proud to have birthed children, but we women have to set an example to our children [...] I do this with pride and stoicism" ("Taking a Stand,", 2020). Looking at the hijab protests in Karnataka and the anti-CAA protests across the country as connected allows us to conceptualise emerging Muslim women' (and girls') political agency as a feminist counter-authoritarian political agency. Such an agency is not episodic but connected to an emerging inter-generational political community of Muslim women.

Hijab v. Kitab[8]: Challenging the false binaries

The dominant discourse around hijab ban in Karnataka is that of the perceived incompatibility between receiving an education (*kitab*) and holding (and publicly expressing) an Islamic faith (hijab). This hijab v. *kitab* framing was captured by two posters that popped up in different parts of the country. A poster circulated by Hindu supremacist groups asserted "*Pehle kitab, phir Hijab*" (translated as "first books [education], then hijab"). A counter-poster from Muslim groups replicated the binary in the older poster by saying "*Pehle Hijab, Phir kitab*" (literally translated as "first Hijab, then books [education]"). Further objectifying the Muslim girls, the latter added "All precious things should be covered." Both

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[6] It is an influential religious text in Hinduism that takes the form of a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Krishna, an avatar of the Hindu deity Vishnu. It was likely composed in the 1st or 2nd century CE. It is commonly referred to as the *Gita*. (Source: Encyclopedia Britannica https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bhagavadgita)

[7] The **Shaheen Bagh** is a neighbourhood in the South Delhi district of Delhi that became famous for protests referred to as **Shaheeh Bagh protests.** There were peaceful sit-in protests led by Muslim women mainly that began on 15 December 2019 and lasted until 24 March 2020 in response to the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) on 11 December 2019

[8] Literal translation: book

positions essentialise Muslim girl's identity to be tied to their sartorial practices. This overemphasis on hijab in both of these seemingly oppositional positions, however, discard Muslim girls' voices and their concerns around issues of safety, fear of majoritarian violence, and access to education captured in the People's Union for Civic Liberties (2023) Report aptly titled as *Closing the gates to education*. In sharp contrast to the binaries presented to them, Muslim girls' vocabulary is dominated by their everyday challenges, their negotiations of the symbolic value placed upon the hijab, the internal diversity in their circumstances and their commitment to constitutional values and democracy. These themes, as outlined below, suggest both a continuity with general trends in youth political participation associated to lived experiences, and the emergence of a feminist counter-authoritarian political agency. This, new type of agency, I argue, helps in regenerating politics in India by offering an alternative vision of India and Indian citizenship rooted in civic ideals such as equality and citizenship rights. This is in sharp contrast to the authoritarian vision of India as muscular Hindu-*rashtra*[9] with a hierarchy of citizens and the rights available to them. In doing so they also offer a feminist vision of Muslim girls as political actors-articulating issues relevant to them as girls and as Muslims, such as the hijab ban but they do so by using the vocabulary of citizenship rights. The feminist counter-authoritarian political agency is similar to Hussein (2023)'s performative visibility among Muslim women activists that aims to transform the terms of the discourse around Muslim women "doing politics" in the UK. While Hussein (2023)'s Muslim women activists are invested in performative visibility (or subjectivities of value) knowing that participatory parity is an uninhabitable category for them, Muslim girls in this study adopt a more utopian vision of themselves as equal. Their activism is premised on their self-conception as rights-bearing Indian citizens, and the hijab ban is viewed as violation of these rights guaranteed by the constitution. In contrast, the UK based activists' starting premise is that of equality as an unattainable goal.

As outlined below, this feminist counter-authoritarian agency rests on living with the ever-present spectre of violence leading to feelings of loss and fear, navigating perceptions around their dressing (and other differences), negotiating the internal diversity within the Muslim community, and upholding constitutional and democratic values.

Lived loss and fear

'Hearing' Muslim girls' voices in the media on the topic of the hijab ban, highlights that girls' concerns are dominated by mundane details of their lives structured around 'exams', 'friends', 'grades' and 'future aspirations', whilst being underscored by the fear of Hindu majoritarianism. In a documentary titled *Karnataka Muslim Girl Students Count Their Losses in Fight for Hijab,* 18-year-old, Ayesha Shifa says:

> I lost my non-Muslim friends. After this [hijab protests] they started hating us a lot […]. I can't concentrate. Whenever I sit to study all this comes to mind […] I have lost my education […] I want to be something good. I should also earn something […] I should make my parents proud. I have more ambitions. I have lost many things I can say. I want my rights back. (The Quint, 2022b).

Ayesha's sense of 'loss' – of mental well-being, of multi-cultural peer group (and society at large), of education and of socio-economic mobility resonates widely in Muslim girls' narratives about the impact of the hijab ban on their lives. Her understanding of the loss of 'rights' is much deeper than just the loss of a legal status as a citizen. This sense of the 'lived' loss expressed by Ayesha Shifa can be seen as a part of Loader et al. (2015)'s conception of "lived experience" of young citizens that shapes their political engagements. In this case the 'lived' loss experienced by Ayesha and other is also deeply gendered in closing-down of educational and career avenues for Muslim girls. As such, the formation

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[9] Hindu state

of Muslim girls as political subjects occurs in this space of everyday encounters with political ideologies that often violently attempt to define and securitise Muslim womanhood and girlhood, and regulate women's social and spatial mobility (Schenk et al., 2022).

Muslim girls' understanding and articulations of the hijab ban in colleges also draws on the wider experiences of fear of violence and intimidation of Muslims in India. During the hijab protests, a viral video of a lone young woman Muskan Khan emerged. She was seen shouting "Allahu Akbar" (Allah/God is the greatest) when persistently heckled by a mob of young saffron clad men as she walks into her college campus in Mandya district of Karnataka (DNA India News, 2022). The *New Indian Express* reports Muskan saying:

> When I tried to enter the college campus, a group of male students clad in saffron shawls objected and asked me to remove my burqa if I wanted to enter, or I could go back home. However, I entered the college, parked my vehicle and was on my way to class when some boys intimidated me, and chanted 'Jai Shri Ram'. In return, I raised my hand to say 'Allahu Akbar'. ("We Should,", 2022).

Muskan's defiant reaction has earned her kudos for bravery in the face of a Hindu-supremacist mob. She also earned the rebuke of many for what was seen as an overt expression of 'Muslim' religiosity. The criticism was levelled against the Muslim community as a whole, for supposedly prioritising their religious practices (such as hijab) over education. Explaining her motivation in shouting back "Allahu Akbar" to the mob, Muskan says, "Taking Allah's name, gives me courage" (BBC News, 2022). Instead of being drawn into the religion v. education debate, Muskan's explains her actions both as personal act (of seeking courage) and also as part of the wider story of the looming threat of violence against Muslims. In doing so, she both claims space for her visible (and audible) Muslim identity, one of the hallmarks of the feminist counter-authoritarian political agency. Ayesha and Muskan's narratives also highlight the interplay of the lived oppression and action in Muslim girls' understandings of their social location and aspirations for change shaping their political agency.

'Just a piece of cloth': De/re signifying the Hijab

Writing about the symbolism attached to the veiling practices of Muslim women, Sirma Bilge (2010) shows that the veil is an "overdetermined signifier deployed to illustrate the 'clash of civilisation', women's oppression in Islam, the fundamentalist peril and the pitfalls of multiculturalism" (p. 10). Similarly, Dwyer (1999)'s work on British Muslim women's dressing shows that "dressing comes to be used as a signifier for essentialised and oppositional identities", the acceptable 'normative' identity v. the unacceptable 'other' (p. 6). The question of whether Muslim women's veils or headscarves are acceptable in public spaces remains a "paradigmatic showcase of the antagonism between advocating universal rights for women and protecting minorities' cultural rights" (Bilge, 2010, p. 6). Though written in the context of Muslim women in the Western liberal democratic contexts, the insights of Bilge and Dwyer are also increasingly relevant to the debates around hijab in India where the secular 'self' v. religious 'other' polarity is redrawn as the secular Hindu (on board with school uniform) v. religious Muslims (disrupting this desired uniformity). In an interview with *The Wire*, Muskan Khan says, "Hijab is my first priority. No one is forcing me to wear it. It's my right, my dignity and my respect. I can never leave it. I feel safe wearing it" (Shireen, 2022). In this quote, Muskan designifies the hijab as a marker of religiosity to something more personal (but essential). Another approach to discussing the hijab was seen in the narratives of the Quint (2022b) documentary where the focus was on showcasing a range of interests and aspirations of Muslim girls' from photography, to music, karate and volleyball. One of the girls' featured in the documentary, Shaheen, says "I am a district level volleyball player". And the video then pans out to show an image of her idol Wilda Siti Nurfadilah, a hijabi Indonesian volleyball player. Shaheen's

narrative designify hijab as inconsequential to these young women's lives and wider interests. It also resignifies it as a matter of choice (as opposed to an imposition) available to any citizen of India. In an interview with the *Deccan Herald*, Muskan further says, "For just a piece of cloth, they are ruining our education" ("Ruining Our,", 2022).

This de/re signification of hijab is notable in the educational context where Muslim girls are deauthorised as legitimate actors in the field of education solely on their appearances (Hussain, 2019). This de/re signification allows Muslim girls to speak of their dressing and their education both as rights available to them, instead of giving into the long-standing binaries of hijab v. kitab or traditional v. modern or religious v. secular ("Ruining Our,", 2022). While many girls like Muskan refused to 'choose' education over hijab and vice versa, following the Court verdict against 'religious dressing' many other girls such as Tabassum Sheik, one of Karnataka's top scoring students 'chose' education. Here, I place the emphasis on 'choice' to problematise the idea that *hijab* v. *kitab* is a real choice available to Muslim girls in India. In an interview to the *Indian Express* following her stellar performance in the state pre-university exam, Tabassum says: "…between education and hijab, I chose education. We will need to make some sacrifices to accomplish bigger things" (Parashar, 2023).

In another interview, a news anchor for India Today Channel (2023) prefaces Tabassum's interview by saying: "…Tabassum Sheik had to make a choice— to adhere to her faith or to continue with her education. But Tabassum chose the latter and emerged as topper in the Arts stream in her second pre-university exams." While the quotes above may suggest as though Tabassum and others like her are making a clear 'choice', a court verdict against their habitual practices can barely be seen as a choice on offer. Muslim girls' 'choice' in these cases are circumscribed by the academic calendar, fear of violent backlash, and the economic inability of families to afford relatively more expensive private educational provision. Describing her so-called choice, in an interview with India Today (2023), a visibly hijab-clad Tabassum says:

> […] I have been wearing the hijab since I was five, so it was very difficult for me to give it up. And I didn't want to, it [India] is a secular country. I should be allowed to wear my hijab while I pursue my education. It felt very unfair, very unjust. […] when the verdict came out my parents encouraged me to comply with the orders […] My parents said that if I was able to acquire an education then I could get to a position where I could prevent such injustices from happening in the future.

In 'hearing' Tabassum's and Muskan's voice, it is essential to remind ourselves secularism as conceived by the framers of the Indian constitution does not require the state to be anti-religious, but instead it asks the state to treat all citizens as equals "irrespective of caste, creed, or colour" (Bajpai, 2000, p.2002). Viewed in this way, Indian secularism is about non-discrimination on religious grounds and forms the constitutional basis for the accommodation of religious minorities (Bajpai, 2022). In the quote above, Tabassum's 'choice' to stop veiling for college and the carry on with veiling outside of it, also resignifies veiling practices themselves as fluid. Hussain documents a range of veiling (and unveiling) practices rather than one streamlined form of 'Muslim' dressing. Hussain (2019) refers to the most common form of veiling, "contextual veiling", wherein women and girls adopted a veil (and unveiled) in accordance with the contexts of going out, meeting elders, social/ritual gathering, praying, and so on (p. 66). Clearly, Tabassum has adopted such a practice of contextual veiling which allows her to attend college unveiled as per uniform policy whilst also veiling in her personal life, including TV appearances. Tabassum's and Muskan's seemingly different reactions suggest that Muslim girls express their feminist counter-authoritarian political agency in relation to hijab in different ways, challenging the notion of Muslim femininity as monolithic. In popular discourses, Muslim girls continue to be demonised when they choose to wear a hijab, and their supposed 'choice' of education over hijab is celebrated with little attention to their voice which

consistently calls out this false *hijab* v. *kitab* binary, as the narratives above highlight.

"We fought also": Internal diversity in political action and agency

Shah and Khurshid (2019, p.460) suggest that the narrative of victimhood of Muslim women, becomes a one-size-fits-all lens to engage with multiple contextual gendered subject positions. This leads to the erasure of diversity that exists within and across Muslim societies and communities, including Muslim girls protesting the hijab ban in Karnataka colleges. Like Tabassum quoted earlier, after the unfavourable high court judgement many Muslim girls had to make a difficult decision to wear the hijab at the expense of their education or carry on with education at the expense of an important aspect of their faith. This rift among the Muslim girls around their responses to the court order calls attention to a wide range of circumstances, attitudes, and motivations among Muslim girls and their families. This diversity within the protest challenges the notion of Indian Muslims as homogenous community with a shared worldview. Speaking on Quint (2022a), Aliya says,

> "in the beginning everyone was supporting… like we will not enter the classroom without hijab. Now, due to exam pressure, more than half of the girls gave up the hijab and sat inside the class".

Another respondent, Almas, adds,

> "We had 200 girls on the first day. Slowly, slowly it kept decreasing… when the verdict came we were 50. And now I guess we are not more than 15…They told me 'you also come with us, for a few months we will remove [hijab], after that we can wear maybe '… I told them 'don't do this'. We fought also…" (Quint, 2022a).

Aliya and Almas's narratives highlight how the decision to choose between hijab and education is fraught with tensions and with varying degrees of 'choice' for different Muslim girls. When asked about her daughter's resistance to the college's uniform policy, including her police complaint against the saffron mob, Hiba's mother says, "I was happy she did the right thing… if there is no hijab what is the point of learning… these girls want to wear the hijab and be educated" [both mother and daughter seen sobbing in the interview] (Quint, 2022a). However, Ayesha's case reported in the Quint (2022a) points out that girls from relatively privileged backgrounds can continue with their resistance against the uniform policy in ways that girls' from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can't. Ayesha notes, "they [my family] are saying that whatever you have studied is enough. In an interview with Quint (2022a), Ayesha's mother notes,

> "I have three daughters. My husband is an auto-rickshaw driver […] We sent them all to government school because we can't pay the fees in private school. My wish is that she goes to a government college. But on the hijab issue, I am scared what will happen".

There are very limited, but important, insights from parents of girls across the media material researched for the paper. This calls into attention two very important aspects of the hijab ban. First, the exclusion of Muslim girls from publicly funded education, and push towards private education which is significantly more expensive and potentially inaccessible to a majority of families like Ayesha's. PUCL Report (2023) notes that over 1000 girls in the five districts across the state have dropped out as result of the hijab ban and large proportion have applied for transfers to minority institutes.[10] This exodus of Muslim girls from

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[10] Minority institutions in India are educational institutions established under Article 30(1) of the Constitution which gives linguistic and religious minorities a fundamental right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Thes institutions can decide to reserve a proportion of their admissions for students from a minority backgrounds.

public educational institutions will further segregate them from the wider society and maintain the policy framing of "education for Muslims as 'Muslim' education" (Hussain, 2019, p.61). Second, the visible presence of a parent in the frame when the Muslim girls are being interviewed is notable in some of the material analysed in this research. As outlined in Hussain (2021), Hiba and Ayesha's mothers' embodied presence, and their narratives challenge the over-simplistic binary view of Muslim parents as 'against' v. 'for' girls' education. It points towards a complex web of social, cultural and economic relationships that shape Muslim girls' educational trajectories. Ultimately, acknowledging Muslim girls' (and families') diverse circumstances and motivations allows us to disregard criteria of 'free' will or 'free' action driven understandings of agency. Instead, following Madhok (2013), their critical reflections, motivations and desires for change become central to conception of feminist counter-authoritarian political agency.

"…Because I was fighting for my rights": Regenerating democracy

Muslim girls' who found themselves linked to the hijab ban in Karnataka, or affected by it indirectly, were found to be consistently speaking in the language of 'rights' and respect for public institutions, including the police. In the documentary titled *Death Threats, Lost Friendships, Ruined Education—Human Cost of Karnataka's Hijab Ban*, recollecting their first day of exclusion from college, one of the 6 Udupi girls, Hiba Sheik, says:

> I kept questioning him… who are you [male ABVP[11] student] to ask me to go out of college? […] I was fearless because I was fighting for my rights […] I then went to the Bander Police station to file a complaint. (The Quint, 2022a).

The remainder of Hiba's interview goes on to document the Islamophobic and misogynist threats of violence she has been exposed to on social media following her complaint. Another student, Almas asks: "Is there no equality for us as Indians?" (The Quint, 2022a).

Hiba and Almas's quotes above show a perceived sense of equality in the eyes of the State and its institutions evoking Article 14 of the Constitution of India that states: "The State shall not deny any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India" (Government of India, 2022). These narratives suggest that Muslim girls also derive their citizenship claims from the Constitutional vision embedded in provisions around Cultural and Education Rights for the minorities (Articles 29–30) and right to education (Article 21) in the constitution (Government of India, 2022). Not only is the language of rights a recurring theme, but also ideas like secularism and equality as cornerstones of Indian democracy can be heard in their voices. Viewed in this way, Muslim girls in the hijab protests, much like the anti-CAA protestors, position themselves as the custodians of Indian democracy in sharp contrast to the authoritarian state, the educational institutions and far-right groups. Their feminist counter-authoritarian political agency rests on their enactment of the feminist public pedagogy of protest through mainstream media, against the authoritarian State. In doing so, Muslim girls protesting against the hijab ban are not only upholding the constitutional values but are 'regenerating democracy', as conceptualised by Pickard and Bessant (2018), through offering an alternative vision of India and of Indian citizenship. In this vision, India is seen as a collection of diverse communities that are equal in the eyes of the law, but have distinctive cultural rights; and Indian citizens are conceptualised as custodians of the constitution itself that grants them their citizenship rights.

Conclusion

Findings of this research resonate with Joly and Wadia's (2017) description of Muslim women's modes of political participation as derived from their experiences at the confluence of a range of diverse societal contexts. However, like hostile state policies (e.g. headscarf bans) in the West, Government's policies (such as CAA, Karnataka hijab ban, etc.) too have spurred Muslim women and girls political participation. Drawing on Bell Hooks' scholarship on African American women, it can be said that the 'work of hearing" Muslim girls' mediated voices around the Karnataka hijab ban suggests that their marginality is "much more than a site of deprivation […] it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (Hooks, 1989, p.206). As such they are "simultaneously precarious and creative" (Hall, 2017, p.5) where they are both constrained and mobilised as suffering actors (Harris & Dobson, 2015). I found that Muslim girls protesting the hijab ban and the subsequent unfavourable judgement are enacting a feminist counter-authoritarian political agency, which I view, in continuum with the anti-CAA protests, is part of a diverse inter-generational counter-authoritarian political community spearheaded by Muslim women. Like the feminist public pedagogy embodied by Muslim led anti-CAA protests, feminist counter-authoritarian political agency of Muslim girls in this research is tied to their lived experiences of loss and fear, the re/designification of hijab and their commitment to constitutional values. Muslim girls' agency in the hijab ban case need to be understood as diverse and responsive to a range of socio-economic circumstances, attitudes, and motivations. Doing the 'work of hearing' Muslim girls' voices around the hijab protests enables us to think of Muslim girls as dynamic political actors, regenerating democracy by offering an alternative vision of politics based on the constitutional vision as opposed to the authoritarian, Hindu majoritarian one. This forces us to recalibrate our understanding of political agency to include a wide range of articulations of injuries and injustice, as well as a wide range of visions and commitments to social change.

Ultimately, this paper attempts to offer an interesting way to understand mediated voices of Muslim girls' on a focussed issue (the hijab ban in Karnataka in this case) with the help of technology that enables transnational scholars like myself to engage with our field from a distance and maintain the engagement over a period of time. In future, this methodological approach has the potential of creating a new type of researcher-researched encounter that does not rely on extractive logics, and can be safer, especially in authoritarian or conflict contexts. Needless to say, there is still scope for further research on this issue by comparing voices in mainstream media and unmediated voices (including social media accounts, interviews and so on).

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[11] Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) (transl.)*All India Students' Council*) is a right-wing all India student organisation affiliated to the Hindu nationalist organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

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