CHAPTER 4

Exploring Hijabi Students' College Experience: Navigating Home and College life

4.1 Introduction

All the participants who participated in the present research, for them, going to college is a 'natural' and an 'obvious' step after completion of senior secondary exams. All the participants asserted that 'not going to college' appears to be an almost unthinkable move. The previous chapter demonstrated that parents, especially mothers have a positive attitude towards their daughter's education and career as they were never given the opportunities to choose between completing education and marriage and further, they view investing in education as an asset to acquire prestige which at the same time act as an insurance against insecure future. The audible pronouncement of their support for daughter's education is a testimony which challenges the notion that Muslim parents are against their daughter's education (Hussain, 2023). For many, the argument is not therefore, going to college and acquiring a degree for potential future benefits but lies in the fact of whether women should be exposed to college culture and beyond what college life entails. For many participants, their parents are keenly aware of the moral ambiguities that college space offers. The danger for young women leaving home to go to college lies in the range of experiences they will inevitably be exposed to on campus; hence college education is not only about having a degree of necessity but also about networking, meeting people [male and female] from diverse background and in the process participating in different activities. The previous chapter demonstrated the participants' 'strategic' and 'selective' deployment of Islamic knowledge, which they mostly obtain form social media platform to assert their 'rights given by the Quran' and hence challenge certain cultural practices. This reflects the significance of education and of being a *'shikito pori'* (educated daughter), which in fact informed and enhances their religious understandings of their Islamic rights and which they strategically tailor to meet their lived experiences.

Every single participant describes their college experience as 'memorable', and 'enjoyable'. Regardless of the college experience, the classroom experience was heavily dependent on the classmates and teacher's approach. Indeed, apart from the fact that they will be attaining educational qualifications, college campuses are spaces where participants not only decide who they would befriend with, but also, they have to navigate

the complex challenges that come with their taking up of hijab and their practice of certain elements of faith. The participants wore hijab, which was not the norm a decade earlier, though not unusual in the present.

Guindi noted that the Muslim veil, or the hijab as a form of religious dress, is located at the intersection of dress, body, and culture (Guindi, 2000, p. xvi). Certainly, chapter 3 highlighted the various ways in which socio-cultural norms of dress are played out on women's bodies that visually mark and code religious, cultural and gender norms (Zine, 2006). As a medium of 'nonverbal ideological communication' people assign static and uninformed set of imposed meanings (Hoodfar, 2003) to hijab. Actual consequence, hence, is that its encrypted socio-cultural, religious, political and lived experience of the wearer and the messages that it wants to convey goes routinely unnoticed and wearer is viewed as 'non-persons', to use Goffman's term. While the obligation to practice the 'archaic, gender-oppressive' practice continues to be an overarching aspect in the development of an embodied moral habitus of 'good Muslim woman', nevertheless it also comes with additional challenges when it comes to practicing in 'civil spaces' such as educational institution. Sarroub (2005) in her ethnographic study described how the hijabi Yemeni school girls negotiate the 'liminal in between spaces' between home and schools as 'sojourners' between two worlds (cited in Zine, 2006).

The narratives of this chapter are drawn from the young adult participants, who, during the time of interview were pursuing bachelor's degree courses in different streams and are studying in two prominent colleges of Karimganj - one is co-educational, and the other is exclusively a female college; both these two colleges offer courses till graduation.

This chapter focusses on the articulation of hijabi participants' college experiences starting from their initial experiences of wearing hijab, reactions and responses from the family, peer group and teachers. Findings spoke of how hijab comes across as being central to the experience of participants. It should be noted that this is in no way an attempt to identify that all the participants shared equal experiences. What gets highlighted through their narratives is that they have to deal with various stereotypical and stigmatized images that involve the wearer and the material object in the broader socially secured setting that is, college.

The first section of the chapter introduces the reader with the story of three participants who took up hijab at different stages of their adulthood, but their decision can in no way be reduced to reductionist and essentialist ideas of familial pressure or religious dictates. This is not to say that the role family play is irrelevant to the way one appear but rather to show that some women choose to wear hijab which grows out of 'influential circumstances in an individual's life' (Gupta, 2015).

While it is important to acknowledge that there are cases of forced enforcement of wearing of hijab, one cannot ignore the fact that there are young, educated women who wear the hijab by their own individual will or choice, so to speak. This lack of knowledge results in the perpetuation of incorrect assumptions and stereotypes against the wearer.

What is striking is that unlike their mothers and other female figures, most of the participants interviewed for research have taken up hijab relatively later in their life either in the beginning of their bachelor courses and others took up in the middle or towards the end of the bachelor courses. Smith and Hefner (2007) noted that college and university lives constitute a significant point in their lives in the wearing and not wearing of hijab.

Adopting hijab at different points in their lives and bringing them into public spaces where it is fraught with complex stigmatized and stereotypical images was not an easy decision for these young participants and more so when the struggle involved reactions from the families, peers and, is what the second section deals with. What emerges from this section is how the meaning of hijab and its rules are reassessed, renegotiated and remain influential to deal with different challenges such as academic challenges and socializing with relationships of different kinds in the context of college life.

Attending college with diverse student population comes with its own share of challenges. Hence, the third sections of the chapter focus on the participants' experiences of their exposure to questions, comments, jokes about the Islamic practices. They also described instances where they feel frustrated and pressured to enlighten their college peers with regard to hijab which occasionally results in judgmental responses. Looking in this way it appears that visibility of hijabi women in educational space have opened questions about Islamic practices in new ways. Nonetheless, not a single participant reported of any biased or disturbed ideas made about Islam or Muslim as such. Moreover, as participants explore educational settings, their multiple experiences are indicative of how public perception

through labels and stereotypes considerably influences their everyday experiences in college.

The fourth section highlight teachers' and peers' perceptions on Muslim college students in general, and hijabis in particular. This involves teachers' perceptions about Muslim students and the participants nuanced interactions with the teachers inform them [participants] of the 'negative' 'orientalist' assumption which, what seems to unite the teacher with the global and (un)acceptable vocabulary of politics. It is suggested that the young participants were interviewed at a time when the 2022 hijab ban controversy in Indian educational institutions has made a highlight in media. In that historic moment, the section would highlight how the hijabi students feel about it and its impact, if happened any in their daily interactions, and modifications, if any they made to their hijab or to their social interaction in college campuses.

4.2 Turning points in life-heart changing personal experience[1]

The previous chapter demonstrated that religion is not the only factor that determine whether a Muslim women will cover her head or not. The handful of participants' mothers' narratives in chapter 3 suggests that the religious symbolism surrounding the head-covering practices are regulated through "their everyday gender practices and close-knit social networks" (Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 403). While the participants and their mothers strongly agree that a Muslim woman ought to dress in a 'modest' and 'respectable' manner, indeed the participants deliberate choice to wear hijab at a particular point in their lives underscores that the religious commandment cannot be forced upon any one and no one has the authority to mandate one to wear it. Leila Ahmed's (2011) interviewee too specified that enforcement should come from the believer herself. She explained nowhere in the Quran does it entrust others to force the divine law on another, but she argues that any time a person is forced to dress a certain way it augments animosity.

Each individual is a unique entity, as well as their own experiences. The hijab users have different experiences with their hijab, along with the motivations behind their utility. They also did not miss the beginning of their journey to adopting the hijab. Adopting it cannot

[1] Following Goffman (1963).

be said to be instantaneous, or just a matter of days or months as the following narratives configure.

4.2.1 What the participant says on wearing it for the first time

Toma

At the time of the interview, Toma, a student from commerce background, was in B. Com 1st semester. Toma's experience added richness to the study as she shared an interesting perspective as someone who in her adolescence stage did not want to attend a famous private unaided school due to their uniform and rather choose a senior secondary school which was new in her location, and which fulfills her checklist of dress requirement. In Toma's family, almost all the women wore the hijab, *burga* and *neqaab*. She spoke at length on her beginning of hijab journey, which follows next:

> "I always knew that I'm going to wear a hijab because my family – my *ma* started wearing *burga* and *neqaab* when she arrived at Saudi. And then back at my host place, all my *khalas* and *chachis* (aunts) [married] wear the same, but none of my [unmarried] paternal sisters wear hijab and nor even they take scarves. And then I was sure that as I am staying in Saudi as part of the Kingdom's rule, I have to wear the hijab. So yes, I did start early when I was in class IV [school days], and I was okay with it. And then *papa* (father) decided that we're going to Karimganj. So, I was like, "Oh, okay, I'm going to wear my hijab in Karimganj too. So, four years I wore it in Saudi and then we moved back to our native place".

Toma narrated her hijab journey with calmness in her speech and gesture. As her narratives highlight, she has been brought up in a family where wearing hijab was the norm for married women and was really considered as an option for the unmarried one. Yet she chooses to wear it as a mark of respect for the law of the land [Saudi]. What also set Toma's experience, apart from other hijabi participants, is that until Class VII she had been living in Saudi. After completing class VII her family moved back to Barak Valley. As a result, Toma's relation with the hijab is profoundly linked to the experience of geographical mobility.

In the initial days of her resuming school journey in Karimganj, as a young hijabi, Toma shared her anxious moment with the researcher:

> "Can vividly recall the first day when I came for registering into a private school…because before coming to Karimganj, my *Amma* (mother) was like 'search for good schools'. So, I googled it, and I found out about a school in my own area. And then there was this idea which crossed my mind that, why don't I enroll in this school? So, then I approached *Papa* and said, "I want to go to this school. There are many private unaided English medium schools which has opened in Karimganj since last so many years, but their uniform is shirt and skirt till class X, I got the information, and the school administration do not even allow to wear hijab and leggings underneath the skirt. So, I am not fine with it, but then after I shared my dilemma with papa he was like, just start in this school, and eventually you will like it. It is a very well-known school and the school that you are suggesting has opened in recent times and has many Muslim students and we do not know how the school environment is. Because after the completion of school education you will be admitted into a college and meet other people. It's not always going to be that you're going to be with Muslim students. You have to meet different people who are not Muslims, and you have to interact with them. Life, as they say, is a learning experience. So, I was like ok, fine, but in college I would mix with students from other faith and class backgrounds".

Though her father discouraged her from moving into the school she choose for herself, believing that that the school that he has selected is a healthy way to integrate into a new society, yet Toma's preoccupation with the Islamic environment made the father to give up his choice of school.

Years later, when she enrolled into college, she was scared about the college environment being a hijabi student, "[how] it's going to be because I heard a lot about antagonistic political situation of our country in media and it scared me a lot. So, after enrolling in the college, I was just looking, around here and there for anyone who wore a hijab, or looked Muslim. But then I saw a few girls wearing *unna* as head-cover, I was relieved. I was like there is someone … who is like me. I was the first hijabi in my classroom and later, seeing me in hijab, many Muslim students approached me asking me how I prepared myself to wear it as they are not able to pluck the courage to wear it in the middle of their course of study".

Elmna

At the time of the interview, Elmna, an English major student was in B.A. 4th semester. Born in Dimapur, her family shifted to Karimganj after her higher secondary exam. She

described the school she attended in Dimapur had diverse student population. It was only after coming to Karimganj that her mother started to wear *burga*. As she was approaching her final year of college graduation, her mother insisted on her to start wearing hijab and if not hijab at least to cover her head with *unna* as her other cousins [much younger than her] are wearing it. She explained how she declined her mother's request and explained why and narrated how she decided to start wearing the hijab.

> Elmna eyes shone when she says "I politely decline my mother's request. Because I was not ready for it." What my *mumma* thinks is that the piece of cloth does not speak for me but my actions. But, for me, both the piece of cloth covering my hair and my actions really speak for me. It was during the time of COVID, having ample time I researched on the YouTube the importance of dressing for Muslim women, got to watch a lot of male, female Islamic scholars speaking on it, understood its significance and took baby steps towards it. What I understood after watching the videos is that *unna* is a cultural practice of South Asian culture. Since it fails to give proper body coverage and at times betray the wearer by slipping off, it cannot be called hijab. We should wear hijab for the love of Allah and not for *matat kapor na dile manushe e kita koibay* (if we do not cover our head, what the people will say).

Read and Bartkowski (2000, p. 403) while narrating experience of one of their participants [Muslim] found out that after she heard various prominent Muslim speakers' who spoke on the benefits of wearing the veil in the school, their participant decided to put on veil. Just like the Muslim woman of Read and Bartkowski's study, Elmna and other participants from this research also had been inspired by the female-male Muslim scholars speaking in online platform. According to Dwyer (1999, p. 17), these influential talks result in 'an increased orthodoxy' among some of the pupils and this gets reflected in their 'more explicitly Islamic dress' which often include wearing of the hijab and other kinds of modest dress - long skirts and trousers.

Pakhi

Pakhi, a Botany major student, at the time of interview just got promoted in her final year. She studied in diverse school environments from the convent to Kendriya Vidyalaya. She then went to do medical coaching outside Assam. Not able to clear the exam, she then took admission in BSc. course in one of the co-educational colleges in Karimganj. No one in Pakhi's family or extended family wore the hijab but they covered their head with *unna*.

She told the researcher that her paternal uncles are very conservative in terms of young unmarried women's choice of dress. Yet, she considers her father liberal in terms of her dressing choice, as he used to bring for her western dresses when he used to travel outside for his business purpose. She explained to me that her decision to wear the hijab was part of a personal turning point in her life that she underwent after her mother was diagnosed with cancer and eventually her untimely death.

An interesting observation that the researcher made is that most of the participants interviewed brought out at least one such health [mental] breakdown in every family - death of either one of the parents or breakups with their boyfriend and the eventual closer to their faith. These stories of initiation into hijab journey in certain defining moments of their life illustrates that college going young adult female on their own choice[2] adopted hijab and other forms of 'conservative' dress. The participants the researcher interviewed, most of all, spoke of positive experiences when they put on the hijab. But when it came to adoption of 'burga' and abaya, indeed they face minor 'interrogation' such as "you have covered yourself from head to toe, who will see you and give you marriage proposal", "How will people identify who is the mother and who is the daughter as both of us wearing abaya". However, in these instances, the reasoning behind the refusal by the participants' mother could be read as 'undermining their mother's authority' and claiming, 'a moral and religious superiority' as most of the mothers and other adult relatives put before the researcher "*ekon* (now) [emphasis] we have to learn religion from them". Such contested point of tensions surrounding hijab within intimate circles also gets reflected in the work of Read and Bartkowski where the mother-in-law who suddenly stopped wearing veil felt that the continuation of wearing veil by her daughter-in-law is the use of power to appear more religious and devout before the elders (Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 406).

Bullock in her studies found that "many Muslims believe that those who cover are unattractive, and being so, will not be able to get married" (Bullock, 2003, p. 68). Dwyer (1999) like Bullock (2003), also found evidence of a young woman who after putting the

[2] Choice here in no way only refers to individual autonomy or desire as understood in Western discourse. For these participants, it also refers to familial allegiance and in the wider context it refers to community allegiance [as noted in chapter 3]. Therefore, when they speak of choice they refer to two things: one the independent decision to choose of modest dress which they adopt after deliberate decision and calculated search [details are in chapter 5]. Further, when they choose to follow their family or friends they do so as not to feel odd out of place (Amer, 2014).

hijab had ‘faced considerable resistance… from her mother who refused to go out with her.

Where individual participants are concerned, in each of their ‘hijabi inner circle’, there is at least one friend of theirs who remains a non-hijabi, but they believe they will cover ‘someday’. However, as the end of fieldwork approached, they [non-hijabi] reported to wear hijab ‘sometimes’ or cover their head with *unna* as a ‘matter of expressing solidarity with their friends’. So, the struggle of wearing and not wearing hijab is not only with the family and friends but also with oneself. Queen, a non- hijabi responds:

> “I cover my head when I click photo with them. They are all in hijab and I am the one without it. Though they never told me to cover my head, yet I feel ‘odd’ when I do not cover my head and click photo with them. So, in general I like to blend with them”. So, participant like Queen, as argued by Read and Bartkowski (2000) in their findings, that some of the Muslim women that they interviewed, were putting on the veil, as they call it, ‘because they had friends who did’.

Only four participants wore hijab from their senior secondary classes and hence could not explain differences in reactions between wearing the hijab and not wearing it. They also could not recall any differences in their friends’ approach towards them, but they too have faced questions about their religious belief. For these participants, from *unna* to hijab was an ‘easy transition’ and it was met with support and enthusiasm from families and peers.

In the narratives, the wearing of hijab in school also emerged. Only two participants wore the *unna* on the way to school and they took it off once they entered the school. Dwyer (1999, p. 18) notes that the girls she interviewed wore the hijab on the way to school, but then removed them once they enter the classroom, for the purpose of negotiating different spaces. Apart from Toma, another participant kept the *unna* even in school to honour the parents (Werbner, 2007, p. 179). A clear majority of the participants neither covered their head in school nor took it during the beginning of college years.

Therefore, when the participants report that they started wearing it voluntarily in their early adolescence period or after a turning point in their life this could not be taken as a form of pressure or coercion. Additionally, depending on their religious teaching into acceptable and unacceptable mode of behaviour the previous chapter illustrated the experiences of

intergenerational narratives where the practice of head-covering was a way of asserting their sense of belonging and claiming their place within the local community.

The next chapter would make clear the legitimization of participants' hijab use through their everyday experiences. Even in their own desire who adopted hijab, these participants mentioned that the desire of taking it up on one's own gets often juxtaposed with forceful imposition. Participants mentioned a few instances where their non-hijabi friends shared that their parents or boyfriends imposes on them to adopt hijab. This is not to say that they completely conform to their expectations, but they find a leeway to take it off after coming to college.

4.2.1.1 Reactions from their friends and family

As noted, participants are the first in their families to wear hijab and abaya [occasionally] in their college days. Unlike the general perception that Muslim women are compelled to wear hijab by their families, many participants upon reaching their adulthood have adopted it as opposed to their parental and friends wishes. In particular, it is difficult to articulate the reactions of friends and family members in neat, distinct categories. The reactions and responses were extremely temporary and took many different forms. Below are some of the experiences of the participants:

When one decides to take hijab the initial struggles that one has to undergo with her own self as well as with her close friends, Elmna's narratives have beautifully captured that unspoken part:

> At first, I had two non-Muslim friends since my B.A. 1st semester days. I used to wear Western formal dresses [shirts, jeans, T-shirts]. So, I was 'like one of them'. Even when the thought of wearing hijab crossed my mind, I used to think about the reaction of my non-Muslim friends, what will they say? Will they accept and treat me the way they did before my pre-hijab days?" And yeah, I took it after the pandemic got over. "I know they did not accept me wearing the hijab, so they constantly say you look beautiful without hijab, don't wear it, why have you changed your way of dressing? You look beautiful when you wear jeans. And that hurt because I was friends with them … but I liked wearing it and presently they too got used to the fact that I have built an attitude of not caring what they say. I made new hijabi friends too and they had been congratulatory and supportive to my wearing it.

A similar experience was shared by Marie:

> My friends [non-Muslim] from my previous college, I sensed that they felt uncomfortable in clicking photos with me. And one day, one of them told me, "At least you can remove it when we are clicking photos". I was surprised and shocked by their request. I declined politely and told them I have no problem if you go ahead without including me in your photo frame. I know they are ignorant of why I am wearing it. But after a few months or so I understood they no longer wanted me in their group as they [both] used to go out without informing me. You know they were my school friends. I really, really felt bad at that time.

Marie's experience shows a more traumatic reflection. In this context, accepting hijab also meant 'losing some old friends' and making 'new hijabi friend'. Bullock (2003) also found among her participants that they lost connection with their workplace colleagues as the co-workers did not wish to be seen with anybody who wore hijab.

Toma adds that after coming to Karimganj many of her cousins urged her to remove the hijab, which she did coming under pressure and confessed to the researcher that later she felt bad because of her action. Even when she went out with her family members, [they] scold her for wearing 'burga' and asks her "why you are wearing this [burga and mask] when you are not married?"

Pakhi adds:

I have been studying in this college since my higher secondary days. Back then, I did not wear hijab in college, nor did I cover my head with *unna*. I was in my casual and 'normal' appearances, just like you [pointing to the researcher]. Then the pandemic happened, so, online classes helped me a lot to prepare myself to present my new hijab looks in front of my teachers and my peer groups.

While interviewing the participants, the researcher found out that being 'normal', and 'to fit in' was a common and obvious response among the hijabi students. In the case of Elmna, the possibility of her friends not treating her in the manner they would do hold her back in wearing hijab. Nevertheless, she overcame the fear of 'fitting in' and embraced her hijab. The participants' responses indicate that looking 'normal' for them as well as for the wider audience meant conforming to dominant dress patterns of traditional wear without

covering the head (Ali, 2005). The concept of "what is normal" arose most often in conjunction with discussions regarding Islamic dress and its way of using particular spaces. Participants who took hijab in the middle of academic calendar, its adoption has been the source of much discussion and concern. This is so because it is their peers and teachers who has to get used to their 'changed appearance'. It should be added that pre-stigma classmates being attached to a conception of what their friend once was, are unable to treat them either with formal tact or with familiar full acceptance (Goffman, 1963).

Toma's mother explained that one of the reasons she did not feel it necessary for her daughter to wear the hijab and mask (as *neqaab*) is because they live in Karimganj now instead of Saudi. She can cover her head with *unna*. Even Toma too recognized the difference between her school experience and the first day at college when she expressed her anxiety of not finding anyone at college who 'looked' like her.

Pakhi's female family members are being supportive of her decision to wear the hijab, but it was her father who was apprehensive of her wearing hijab to college. When she asked him the reasons for her to not wear the hijab, he was like, "if you wear it, you will face challenges versus if you do not wear everything would be smooth". Pakhi continues narrating, "Even if he did not express it clearly, I am certain he was referring to the political climate of India and I think that's where his concern is coming from". She recalled that he tried to convince her to take it afterwards, but she was adamant in her decision and didn't listen to anyone.

Here, the underlying feeling among the family members and friends, was that there is a 'normal', mainstream way to dress. Either hijab comes into conflict with that by posing certain 'restrictions' that is best known to the observer, or a feeling that the hijab is not required to the same degree that it might in a more Islamic context. Especially the parents are aware that society establishes the means of categorizing people with what they felt to be 'normal' attributes for each category. Goffman defined normal as those who do not negatively deviate from certain social expectations and obligations. The opposite end of normal is stigma. Stigma, then, is a pejorative (negative) label that applied to an individual's 'differentness', their perceived non-conformity, and a difference in appearance or behaviour from that of normal attributes. That individual is then discredited especially somewhere where such a dress code is not the norm (Goffman, 1963). Moreover, the parents are aware that the teacher may not 'accept them' and would not

make interaction with them on ‘equal grounds’ (ibid.). The suggestion that parents do not want their daughters to be ‘odd one out’ is structured around how a particular individual can avoid the stigma, by not wearing it in spaces where it is inappropriate and have not been worn previously. Goffman (1963) describes this as people feeling obliged to ‘fit in’ to some degree, but how they carry it depends on context.

The young participants were acutely aware of what is the norm in their college in relation to practice of Islam. The participants, when they joined the college, were already informed by their seniors about the college’s religious climate. Covering the head with *unna* is common at co-ed college. If the participants had shown up one day with the hijab at her co-ed college, it would attract a great deal of attention in the class. However, in the all-girls college, if she wears hijab, she hardly stands out.

Of course, not all families object to their daughter’s covering. Other participants reported feelings of support from their families which made it easier for them to wear the hijab. As one participant said:

“Honestly, they (family) said nothing. Just smiled. Of course, your family supports you in positive thing.”

A few women reported that their decision to wear hijab came as a shock to their families since they did not expect them to wear it now.

Thus, participants in this study reported various responses from their families. Responses that highlight support, encouragement, neutral stance, and being scared for their safety. No participant reported facing anger or strong resistance or hostile reactions from their parents because of their decision. Even though they [participants] faced questioning and abundant surprise look from their parents and siblings, the mothers appreciate the fact that their daughters are more engaged with religious discourses than them and believe that there is an ‘increasing’ and ‘growing’ sense of religious awareness among this younger college going generations (Bullock, 2003; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

4.3 Social interactions and life in college

Oftentimes, a large part of college experience is the different social interactions that take place inside the college boundary walls. It is fair to say that for many hijabi participants the social aspect of college is one of the most important. The researcher's participants were not that different. Though performing well in academics are extremely important to many of the hijabis, it is the friendships and social activities, both inside and outside of college that played a significant role in defining their college experience and which they spoke about with enthusiasm and candour. All the participants in the study had a close group or network of friends with whom they socialize in college. Some of the hijabi participants had friends from diverse backgrounds, while others chose to have a more homogeneous group of 'hijabi' friends that complemented their own religious and cultural background. Various factors influenced the type of friends they choose to be with, such as their parents' preferences, personal interests, and college demographics. Following sub-section discusses how the women made sense of their college experiences with Muslim and non-Muslim peers, and teachers, social challenges, social activities inside and outside college, and co-curricular involvements.

4.3.1 Affinity towards Muslim friends

A few hijabis assert that to have a handful of Muslim friends made their college life a 'little easier'. Several participants described their daily schedules which include interacting primarily with students from the same religious group. The explanations for these required interactions with their familiar classmates ranged from a similarity in the language[3] and religious familiarity to a shared schooling experience which they refer to as *'aaram faa ooa jay'* (being in comfort). In Sarroub's (2005) study of Yemini girls, the hijabi girls generally associate with one another, as they find comfort in their shared cultural and religious experiences. Nonetheless, this does not mean that participants do not interact outside of their familiar group. They explain their affinity to the familiar classmates is also motivated by their 'sense of comfort'. Other participants shared schedules of life responsibilities that dictate their home life because of which sometimes they miss college and, even, if they come, they leave immediately after the class gets over. This, too, results

[3] Although people of Karimganj speaks Sylheti, yet students from non-Muslim faith speak both Sylheti and (*suddo*) Bangla akin to the Bangla language spoken in Kolkata.

in self-isolation, where the participants only interact with other Muslim students. Additionally, these limited peer groups formed by the hijabi participants served as a safe space from potential anxiety in having to interact with the unfamiliar college setting. While familiarity served as a space for 'comfort', it also provided an additional layer of protective capsule as the participants in their adult life learnt that the practices of their community have always been 'discredited'. Below Marie narrates her experience by describing how much of her time is spent with only Muslim students.

"After two of my [non-Muslim] friend started to maintain a distance from me, I surrounded myself with the hijabi and other Muslim friends so that I do not have to explain why I can and cannot do certain things. Because they understand me better". Though she maintains relationship with students from various backgrounds, having a small inner circle of hijabi friends who could relate to being a hijabi provides her with a source of support, comfort, and connection to her faith.

Amnah also explains that as a fresher in her college, her initial motivations for only seeking out Muslim friends was the sense of comfort within the familiar. As Amnah adjusted to her classroom environment, she later shared that she interacted with several other students from [Hindu] religious groups, but at the beginning of her college life, what she sought was a familiar and 'safe' peer.

Pakhi further explains that when she is in college her primary focused area is attending her teacher's lectures. Other places such as the canteen and library she visits if the need arise. She does explain that her limited campus exposure was due to her familial responsibilities. However, her time at college, principally with only one of her hijabi friends, supports that her affinity to the familiar was attached more in the sense of comfort and 'imagined community' and less on the demand on time constraint.

Afrida is one participant who alienates and self-isolates herself from outside her familiar circle. She believes that "at surface level, they appear friendly and cordial, but inside their heart they never want your good. Because for them [Hindu peers] our religion is strange, and its rules and regulations do not fit in contemporary times".

Elmna recollected that in the beginning of her college days coincidentally she interacted with non-Muslim students who became her friends and remained so for the rest of the year.

Thus, one could comprehend that she has no Muslim friends in her 1st year of her college life. However, she spoke that she 'gradually 'got connected with her four 'new' Muslim friends not through any college associations or club but through the 'common' honours subject and the tuition classes that they go. She informed the researcher that out of her newly formed four friends, three were hijabis and one was non-hijabi like Elmna. She told the researcher; "I did not wear hijab out of them, nor did they insisted me to wear it. Without the hijab they accepted me and were not rude to me. It was later in my stay in college that I took hijab out of my own volition". Articulating her experience further, "my decision to take up hijab was of course welcomed and appreciated by my hijabi friends but despite explaining my own desire to wear it, my non-Muslim friends failed to understand, or should I say they do not want to understand that I can change for myself".

It is not that the Muslim students had to be on the same page religiously, but that hijabi friendships allowed for a certain support of, identification with and understanding of various values and beliefs. These friends are people who intimately understood what it was like, for example, to have a particular stigmatized self, hence tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their situations, and similar changes in conception of self. Presumably the more socially allied the hijabis is with 'normal' Muslims, the more they see themselves in 'non-stigmatic terms' (Goffman, 1963), yet there are contexts in which if the 'normal' Muslims are seen with hijabis they are viewed in stigmatized way.

Image 4.1: Hijabi and non-hijabi Muslim friends

4.3.2 Diverse group of friends

Regardless of the general pattern to be with the same faith group, the majority of the participants have at least one or two friends from another religious group. They discussed religion as not an obstacle in their friendships. Instead, they seek *soman mejajor* (like-minded people) and differences are accepted and self-avoided. But what is noted is that participants' friendship with hijabi or non-hijabi (Muslim) depended on their lifestyles - whether they live their life according to religious rules and with non-Muslims it depended on the level of comfort. Few of the participants mentioned that certain non-Muslim families still monitor their daughter's dress and movement which is similar to their experiences, and this makes them a common ground to connect with one another.

Hera attended a missionary school where in her class a significant proportion of the student population was non-Muslim, and the Muslim population in the entire school was extremely small. So, most of her friend circle consists of people belonging to other religion. The same circle continued till her college life. Once enrolling herself in degree she met with her long-lost friend from her childhood days, Tana who too is a hijabi. Although a few of her friends enrolled in the same college they took different major subject, so communication got lessened, yet they remained in touch.

Hera's friend Tana who also attended the same school till class VI and then transferred to Kendriya Vidyalaya described a similar experience. During her school days, she too couldn't find a lot of Muslim friends. Her parents played a role in the type of friends she was close to. Her mother set the various boundaries, say for e.g., to 'make friendship with the more 'studious' student.' Parents' perception that students who are studious regardless of their religious background are future oriented and their general approach towards balancing institutional and familial expectations is similar to middle class aspirations. With such circles of friends, the viewpoints of parents are that the chances of falling into 'bad influence' is less.

Naj who in her degree second year started wearing the hijab, also had many friends from her school days who are still friends with her in college life. Her friendship demonstrated the importance of interfaith knowledge in uniting all:

> "My college friends consist of two hijabi friends and two other friends from my school days. They both are Hindu. Together we, the five of them, are good friends. We learn about one another's culture. For instance, at sunset we have our *magrib* prayer, they [Hindu friends] also give *sandya bati* (burning incense sticks, lightening lamps and chanting the name of their Gods and Godesses)".

In her choosing of friends group, Jasine expressed the countries changing political climate:

> "We live in a very difficult time [Hindutva ideology]. So, we cannot always be only with one [religious] group. We need to mix with students from other religious backgrounds too. I am not fond of befriending with only one community".

Toma, a hijabi who came from Riyadh, [capital of Saudi Arabia] has two Hindu friend whom she describes as very close to her. She reflected this on her interview:

> "My two friends Pari and Riya are very close to me. Once, I went to attend the wedding of their sister. Being a hijabi, amidst all Hindu people caught their attention. Then an aunt approached their father and told him to tell me to remove my hijab since 'my community people are absent'. To which uncle smiled and told that aunt, she is wearing for her own self and not for the community".

Participants feel that religion is not a significant factor in the choice of friendships. They do not talk about religion as such. Though conversation and questions about their [Muslim] practices may come up occasionally, it doesn't really play a huge role in their friendship. What is very clear from the narratives is that "normals with whom the stigmatized have repeated dealings gradually come to be less put off by the disability, so that something like a daily round of normalization develop" (Goffman, 1963, p. 52). What is interesting is that "familiarity with the stigmatized does not necessarily reduce contempt" (ibid., p. 53) as the last narrative manifested. In the context of a wedding ceremony where other people dressed in various attire, Toma's hijab flout dominant normal dress pattern and consequently caught visual attention which for those around her set a different space. Such circumstances are what Tarlo (2010) notes are 'architectural configurations of the body in space'.

Image 4.2: Hijabis with both Muslim and non-Muslim friend circles

4.3.3 Negotiating boundaries with male classmates and relationships

For many Muslim women in general and hijabis in particular, one of the social challenges of being in a college environment is struggling and negotiating with heterosexual partnerships of various types – mixed sex friendships, individual male friendship and being in relationship before marriage or dating in popular parlance – practices common for many college youth. While there is a common argument among the participants that they are being 'educated' of the doctrinal rules on the "dangers of outing with and chatting with boys" and social judgments in and around of it; apparently each hijabi participants negotiate in her own way, depending on her relationship with her parents, the types of mixed sex friends group she has, and how religiously devout she is. Indeed, the introductory segment of this chapter hinted at the potential sexual encounters when parents expressed their anticipatory anxiety of the outside world.

Recent findings from research pieces suggest that veiling allows women to attend co-educational spaces such as, schools and universities (Macleod, 1992; Werbner, 2007), averts unwanted male attention (Rozario, 2006). This is a finding which has been widely documented in numerous other studies (Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Bullock, 2003; Ruby 2006; Droogsma, 2007; Litchmore & Safdar, 2016). It is possible to argue that veiling by women act as a protective shield against male gaze which is also tied to modest behaviour (Macleod, 1992; Werbner, 2007). Hence it becomes useful to look at its implications in

hijabi students experience as they navigate their life outside home where there lacks clear demarcation of male and female spaces.

The research participants, Bullock (2003, p. 53) spoke to, noticed that once they had put on the hijab, the men they encountered 'were more respectful' and the men treated them as 'persons' instead of sexual objects. However, the participants of the present research explicitly did not talk of sexual tension in college although they experienced different treatment, albeit in a positive way in spaces outside colleges. Abraham (2002) proposed a three typology of heterosexual relationships among peers to identify the ways they give meaning to these relationships in the light of cultural norms of sexuality. The participants of the present study validate the feeling of "being respected by peers" through reflecting on the most commonly found category of *bhai-boin* (brother-sister), consistent with the one type of category, out of three Abraham (2002) formulated, and narrating their experiences.

Participants narrated how their male friends shifted the interaction with them once they took up hijab. Fauzia narrated that her male classmates informed her that the senior class boys were asking about her as "the girl who wears hijab in your class. The moment made me proudly realize that hijab is making me *'alag'* (apart)". She further adds:

> "After the class gets over and when I wait for an auto most of the time my male classmates join me. What I have noticed that inside as well as outside the classroom when they are with other girls [non-Muslim and Muslim who do not wear hijab] they keep their hands on their shoulder or pushes them for no reason. But when they are with me, they maintain a physical distance, address me as *'boin'* (sister) and they always say, we cannot speak anything before you. We have to watch our tongue before speaking to you".

Elaborating on this, the participant told the researcher that before she wore hijab, periodically, they [boys] used to make fun of other female students and which mostly carried sexual connotation but now even if they do and when she joins them, they divert the topic. There are other instances where the participants expressed that they are being addressed with respectful terms as *'tumi' 'aafne'* (you) instead of *tuin*. Similar to what the participant has expressed, Bullock (2003, p. 56) also includes testimony from women who noticed a difference in 'the way non-Muslim men treat them' before and after their wearing of the hijab and how they would 'apologize [sic] if they swear'.

Another participant recalled that one of her male classmates after winning college election celebrated his victory by punching [fist close] everybody. “In a mood of excitement, he was about to punch me, then immediately paused and apologized. I congratulated him verbally and he took care of it. Upon asking him what drive him to pause before punching me, he took a moment and replied, I always see you talking with our male classmate in a reserve tone. Even when college is over, most of us sit back, *adda dei* (chat) and slowly we leave for home, but you pack your bags and if there is no work left in college you leave immediately. You are different albeit in a good way”.

There are others who shared that even after they wore hijab, their male classmates “want to get free” with them. One participant shared that:

> “There is this one fellow in our class. He has the habit of thumping his classmates [boy or girl] back whenever he talks. So, one day he thumped my upper back and asked what I was doing. I got furious at his behaviour and curtly responded to him that talk face to face and what sort of misbehavior is this [physically touching and talking]. He was taken aback by my reaction and after that day he never talked with me in that way. I do not blame him solely for his action because he saw his other hijabi friends from other colleges, [even from our college too] who do not maintain a boundary when they talk or when they sit together. But he must understand that not all hijabi girls are like them [those hijabi girls who normalize physical touch and do not maintain physical distance]”.

Here the participant not only believes in physical hijab but also believes in ethical and moral implications of hijab. Not only is she ‘normifying’ and presenting the advocated conduct of a hijabi through indirect and sometimes obfuscatory strategies such as. separative technique, deference, modesty but is also ‘cleaning up’ the undesirable example of her own hijabi friends who behave while they are ‘with a normal’ (Goffman, 1963).

Rida’s parents dislike of her interaction with the male classmates. So, respecting her father’s dislikeness, she ignores talking with them if they coincidentally bump into one another in town. Yet, over phone and text she talks and chats with them [only work-related] based on necessity which she describes as *buji buji maati* (I talk thoughtfully).

Eman’s parents have no issue of her talking with her male classmates, yet she says that “my male classmates are flirtatious by nature. So, to avoid any future untoward incident I gave them my mother’s contact number for communication”.

Much like Rida and Eman, other participants explicitly cultivate their friendship exclusively with females and to minimize contact with the male classmates they either gave their mother's contact number or they gave number which they seldom use. Papanek (1973) pointed out the role of telephone as an important medium of developing cross sex friendships which evades modesty prescriptions. At one level, it highlights an interesting change in male-female social relations. To the idea that "boys and girls converse without embarrassment" (Papanek, 1973, p. 321) pervading all sections in society contrasts strikingly with the present research participants who have their own personal phone unlike the telephone which is placed in the semi-public spaces of Muslim homes.

What is fundamentally implied in this section is that exclusive male sociability is marked by reserved mannerisms embodied in complex gendered ways in places outside home, which obliquely demands that male classmates too morally behave with them. For these hijabi participants, the teachings of Islam become a flexible resource and a dynamic tool kit (Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Predelli, 2004) used to activate, reinforce, and subvert gendered boundaries on college campuses.

Image 4.3: Outing with mixed-sex group

Image 4.4: participating in cancer awareness prevention programme

4.3.3.1 Developing romantic relationships with the opposite gender were discussed more secretively with the researcher, since being in relations before marriage stayed beyond the knowledge of the parents on the one hand and on the other hand, it openly defies the Islamic ideal of 'preserving chastity' and eventually act as a potential transgression of the normative expectations of 'women from good Muslim families'. The participants are fully aware of the natural fact that if the parents found their relationship, then their anticipatory anxiety of repercussions would turn out true. Hence, in case of relationships and talking

with male classmates, few of the participants play with the parental rule system as noted in few of the narratives. Others abide by their Muslim female friends as immediate entourage.

Wearing hijab and going in a date is seen as incompatible[4] and the wearer is judged and questioned for her actions by her other Muslim peers. For many hijab wearers, wearing hijab and going out with a male in public space such as restaurant makes the person conspicuous of her religious identity and hence attract unwanted attention from local Muslims who perceive the wearer as engaging in immoral act.

Being in a relationship (boyfriends) is a delicate subject, rarely brought up in interviews. Only four of the participants candidly shared information about romantic attachments, out of which two of them hope to marry their partners and the other two participants, in the past were involved in a relationship and followed 'no-touch' rule.

As one participant says "I was 15 years when I first saw him. He used to stay in the same neighborhood and both of our families shared close family connection. He was pursuing his engineering course outside Assam. So, we hardly met. We used to talk over the phone most of the time. Whenever we meet after long planning, either my best friend or siblings accompany me. Presently, our parents are not aware of our relation so both of us have kept it secret. Only our siblings are aware of it".

Adding to this, another participant remarked that "my friend [boyfriend] studies in the same college but in science stream. My family has known him since my school days. To my family, I presented him as my brother, to which my family obviously objected because I already have two younger brothers at home. But I told my father that he had made me his sister as he has no sister of his own. Since I am very stubborn, my father did not drag the topic further." She further adds, in college everyone knows our relation as brother and sister. So, no one attempts to play around with me".

Participants confide to the researcher that they have seen their other Muslim friends changing their dress in college [brings 'burga' and hijab in college bag] and meeting with their boyfriends and even few of them go on a ride. Asking how they feel about it, to which

[4] In general hijab is not just is not just about male-female dress but an etiquette of decorous behaviour as well (Bullock, 2003). Dating or pre-marital relation is against the doctrine of Islam.

majority of the participants justify their friend's action as *tarar icha* (their choice). The participants are aware of the theological and social repercussions of premarital relations. Theologically engaging in premarital sexual relations or what they call *Zina* is strictly prohibited and stringent punishments are prescribed for both men as well as women (Papanek, 1973; Chakraborty, 2010). Especially when it comes to wearing hijab, burga and face-mask and going in a public space with a male, the couples come under the watchful gaze of the public. To avoid this, they take their best friend or siblings to the restaurant and make them sit with the couple. In this way, the fear and risk of getting caught and eventually bringing shame on families decreases[5] . The 'social performance' is necessary to negotiate between their 'decent' 'good women' image on the one hand and choosing to abide by the Islamic ideal of 'public chaperoned meetings'. In fact both the expressions of stigma and respectability are present and how such tensions inform public chaperoning, which rests on the assumptions of their sartorial choices by which they will be perceived in public place.

It must be noted, in this context that the idea of 'public chaperoning' (Dube, 1988) aligns with the concept of 'halal dating' which is often discussed in online platforms (Ali et al., 2019). Ali et al. (2019) spoke on the three-dimensional form of halal dating. These are: presence of a chaperone, avoiding physical intimacy and the intention to marry (ibid., p. 13). The participants seemed to be aware of these three principles which are grounded in religious rules for arranging marriages.

On the contrary, the majority participants, for whom, dating or they called *'line mara'* are out of the question. For some participants, their self-religious conviction restrains them from having a relationship with the opposite sex before marriage. And for others, engaging in pre-marital relationships would break parents 'trust' and bring 'dishonour' to the reputation of families. Thus, they focus their attention on the completion of studies. However, it was interesting to know that this did not stop them from developing temporary romantic feelings toward men who either could be their male classmate or friend's brother. However, the participants did not voice their feelings. These are the constraints they themselves have chosen.

[5] Karimganj is a very small place. Most of the participants asserted that here everyone knows everyone else. So, when you are out you will meet with one or the other familiar faces. So, if one sees going out alone with a boy the information will reach home before the person reaches home.

Toma shares, “although premarital sexual relations are not allowed in Islam, but this is not absolute ruling. There are Islamic way to approach this such as involving the family members from the beginning. But the culture of Muslim families considers this as *shorom er kotha* (a matter of awkwardness). It is a psychological issue which society has made a religious issue. However, Toma has observed in her circle that some families arrange meetings with the person after the family has selected the potential spouse. In that manner, when the family is involved from the beginning, the challenges that one faces on meeting *chupke chupke* (hideous meeting) without informing the family subsides”.

Another young participant says that:

> “I stay as a paying guest (PG). I think I have a free situation because I can misuse the rules of paying guests. I mean I can go anywhere on the pretext of going home. So, I don’t have parents who can keep a close eye on me, although distant relatives are here. But they inform me of their arrival just in case I have class or tuition. So, I can do whatever my heart desires, but I choose not to do anything. I even went to the extent of wearing hijab so that male classmates consider me as a married woman. See, I got enough *‘azaadi’* (freedom) to do many things - for instance, staying in PG and pursuing my degree course, my parents allowed me to sing, allowed me to travel alone to home without anyone accompanying me. They have allowed me to do all these things because they trust me. So, I feel that my parents and my image of being a good daughter would receive a jolt if ever I enter a pre-marital relation. It will also impact on my other siblings and cousins’ future studies.

Here, the above narratives highlight that the participants did not want to take the advantage that the college space has offered - making male partner, unrestrained movements - as well as they do not want to disturb the established life that lies ahead. So, getting an opportunity to do something also means exercising self-control not to do certain things in the name of opportunity (Gupta, 2015). The realization of breaking their trust and jeopardizing other sibling’s chances of pursuing education made the participant to exercise her ‘agency’ which “ensues not from sovereign subjects but from trained and disciplined bodies” (Baerveldt, 2015, p. 542). Not breaking parents’ trust seems to be an important notion for majority of the participants.

The foregoing narratives suggests that just as wearing of hijab imposes behavioural restrictions such as “… holding hands with the opposite sex … or riding on the back of a

motorcycle holding on to an unrelated male driver" (Hefner, 2007, p. 399), yet at the same time those who abide by this 'ideal' behaviour associated with their wearing of hijab are careful about their interactions with men for fear that they be accused of flirtatiousness or, worse, of sexual impropriety (Brenner, 1996). In response to the 'religiously prohibited behaviours' those who wear hijab and takes ownership of their sexuality 'negotiates' the virtues and expectations of hijab by identifying the non-kin relationship as 'bhai-boin' (brother-sister) emphasizing the platonic nature of relationships. Very much in keeping with Abraham (2002) who pointed out that Muslim students and girls in particular, use this category to describe their heterosexual friendships with the opposite sex (Abraham, 2002), the boundary of which is fluid in that it can be a safe way to initiate true love and may work as a cover-up for courtship (ibid., p. 345). In this way, participants' statements reflect how the idiom of fictive kinship (Makhlouf, 2017) is brought forth to describe their heterosexual relations within Islamically and culturally permissible boundaries.

4.3.4 Aspiring to succeed - academic and career aspirations

Despite the concern of the parents of their daughters exposing to the immoralities of the larger world, parents' involvement in their daughters' educational careers have influenced positively to enroll them into higher educational settings. Studies (Rahiman, 2023) have found that Muslim women in their pursuit of educational and career choices have to negotiate at multiple axes of power - family, religious communities. Even to reach secondary and higher secondary levels of education they have to surpass numerous challenges (ibid.). The limited opportunity behind educational choices is not an outcome of lack of economic capital; rather community based gendered norms underpinning religious ideals (Gupta, 2015).

Indeed, what makes this whole section more piquant to research are the encouraging remarks and support that the participants achieve which makes clear that the families view their daughter's education as primarily about intellectual growth. Unlike them, few hijabis felt a certain pressure - internal as well as external into marriage after higher secondary education but their zeal to pursue a meaningful academic career was a daily reality of the hijabi women in the present study.

This also indicates the inter-generational changes in educational access occurring between the mother and the participants. Additionally, participants also informed the researcher in

some cases, it is the mother who wants them to stand on their own feet rather than sitting at home whereas majority of participants reported that it is the father who wants to see them independent. Only a few participants assert that one also has to take stand for herself if one finds parents succumbing to the extended family's prioritization of marriage over education. Indeed, in the case of one participant, her grandfather supported and encouraged her to go for higher education outside of Barak valley.

> "My [paternal] grandfather was much more supportive than my mother… you can understand, when the matter is about daughters, mothers are a bit too protective and concerned. More so, when we decide to go outside, they are like "*o befotho jaito gia* (they would go astray)".

Participants also mentioned the role of researcher as positively influencing the parents' outlook towards higher education. Few of the participants mentioned that their father emphasizes that "look up to your *didi* [6], how far she went leaving the comfort of home and you all are more used to the idea of staying at home". During the course of interview, the participants as well as their mother 'proudly boasted' that daughters from their extended relatives also went to complete University education and only one of them is pursuing Ph.d. from NIT.

The participants shared to the researcher that they spent a significant amount of time thinking about their future career. Every single participant in the study is planning on pursuing post-graduation or teacher training courses. They all expressed their desire to work once they had been granted their graduate degrees; several of the college going adult women were very clear on what they wanted to do once they are graduated from college. If they do not get into any of these courses, then they are planning to engage themselves as teachers in any school or offer private coaching. However, not all the participants are sure enough whether they will do job, and some women deliberately choose to refrain from pursuing further educational goals and opt for 'settling down'. This section will refer mostly to their aspirations which the participants are clear about and the academic concerns and confusions they have.

[6] Participants refer to researcher as *didi* (elder sister).

One participant shared her desire to pursue post-graduation programme from outside Barak valley.

> "I was thinking about doing masters from Guwahati and consequently appear for NET exam and secure a Ph.D seat in any University. I find the teaching profession interesting because it is one of those things where one can seek knowledge as long as one wants. And I feel like when you go to university for higher studies, for example, when you [pointing to the researcher] came to my home, my extended female family members came to see you. Everyone was curious that a Muslim women came from university to take interviews. So, it just means a lot and I would be the first one to go to university".

Another participant is very clear about where she would head after college education. When asked, she responded firmly with, "administrative career". She explained:

"Women clearing administrative exams in huge numbers in recent times has inspired me to take up this field. I have already started gathering information on the coaching institute which provides coaching online".

However, not all the hijabis knew exactly what they wanted to study or what career they wanted to pursue. This becomes evident when the participant asked the researcher a series of questions such as does completing B.Ed. and clearing TET exam will I become a teacher? Do I have to clear NET exam to become a teacher at college? The participants cite the examples of some of the young teachers who cleared up their NET exams and joined their college, now pursuing Ph.D. programme. Though they have the basic knowledge of what exams and courses are available for the career they want to choose, nonetheless they believe that all these exams are the end goal of what they want to achieve, which most often is not. Those exams are just the tip of the iceberg of the intricate working of the higher education system which they want to know in detail.

Image 4.5: hijabi participants attending the convocation ceremony

Image 4.6: Participant after receiving her post graduation degree certificate

Image 4.7: Participant receiving two-wheeler motor after she secured 1st division in her higher secondary exams

4.3.5 Participation in extra-curricular activities

While focusing on their college experiences in the arena of academic and social bonding, they also participate in extra-curricular activities in colleges. The narratives show the participation in extra-curricular activities is negligible because it operates on

psychological, social and economic backdrop. Only a handful of participants regard extra-curricular activities as an important part in their college life. The research did not find any hijabi or non hijabi [Muslim] participant participating in any sports activities. Upon asking the reason behind their non-participation, participants informed them that they were never encouraged to take part in sports either by family or by their schoolteachers. So, now they feel awkward playing in college. Few of the participants have an interest in playing badminton which they play in their respective homes. This reflects that participants do not share a dilemma of hijab as barrier, or it discourages them from taking part in extra-curricular activities. The real challenge, hence, is not the presence of faith symbol but more on lack of appropriate support system.

Fiza and Jabin by wearing hijab, they performed on stage as an anchor, recited poem, organized fresher, and farewell programmes, participated in debate, quiz competition. Jas is one of the few participants who had an interest in singing. She sings *'Naat'*(nasheeds)and bollywood songs as well. At her cousin's insistence she also opened a YouTube channel for a short period of time to showcase her talent.

Image 4.8: Delivering her farewell speech

Image 4.9: After winning quiz competition

While the hijabi participants participate and attend college cultural and departmental events, it is the Saraswati Puja in which most of the research participants hardly makes their presence felt. Their account in no way reflects that their religious visibility presents a dilemma of not attending the Hindu festival. On the contrary, lack of excitement among the participants closely aligns with not participating in it. And for those who attended the festival, it is a means of 'get together'. The fun to mingle with peers on the day of Saraswati

Puja, have been reported in studies of Muslim girls in a government school in Assam (Goswami & Bhuyan, 2024).

Some of the participants explain their absence during puja as “my other friends don’t go, so what will I do there alone”.

Others expressed that, “we do not participate in the organization of the puja rituals[7], but only once in the beginning of our college life we came to college to witness the cultural events. We came because we wanted to hang out with our friends from other colleges”.

One participant shares her views: “in these three years of college life, two years I am not counting because of pandemic and in the final year I have attended the event late in the afternoon as some of my friends insisted me to go with them. If I hadn’t attended, they would have felt bad”.

Furthermore, discussion on extra-curricular activities made the majority of the hijabi and non-hijabi Muslim students as nothing to speak and they sat in silence, few hijabi girls took the opportunity to participate on stage. Participants who are more confident in expressing their Islamic identity seemed more comfortable with to participate in hijab. As these participants express, they want to hear from the audiences, “she is wearing hijab. She is Muslim!” Thus, stigma is repurposed by these students who made their physical presence visible in the public sphere and in this way as, Goffman contends, is a way for the individual to decrease tension, and to make it easier for oneself and the others to withdraw covert attention from the stigma, and to maintain natural connection in the official content of the interaction (Goffman, 1963).

Others struggle to answer why they do not take part, and majority of them responded with casual and humorous reasons such as, “we are lazy to participate”, “the annual festival of college is like a break for us to rest”, and “we don’t see any benefit in participating”. In a way, participants’ response as regards their involvement as well as non-involvement in college extra-curricular activities counter the dominant stereotypical discourse that some

[7] The organizers are aware that Muslims do not participate in preparation of the event. So, they respect their decision to sacred matters and do not tell them directly or indirectly to help them in organizing the events.

teachers seemed to think they are - they live a suffering life due to their restrictive gendered (veiled) practices (Droogsma, 2007).

4.4 Perceptions about hijab wearers among non-Muslims

4.4.1 Innocent questions, loaded with judgement and the responsibility to educate

Social interactions in colleges take place in 'mixed contacts' (Goffman, 1963) and are mounted with challenges. Interactions and conversations with friends and teachers include issues such as grappling with religious stereotypes. The issues of stereotype turned out to be salient in almost all of the narratives. Although hijabi participants narrated that they have experienced direct comment, in their respective colleges, all of them acknowledged the fact, as a whole, covert stereotypes exist in spaces of education and society.

Participants reflected that wearing hijab in the middle of their college life brought up 'confusing states among many circles', where they found themselves being questioned and assessed for their 'new look'. Indeed, questioning of such type confirms 'stigma symbols' as possessing certain social properties which reiterates differences in lifestyle. It also explains, compared to the non-hijabi participants, those who chose to wear the hijab reported more overt encounter of questioning and remarking behaviours from their teachers and peers in their respective colleges. Further, the non-hijabi female students reported that hijabi students who are vocal and excessively socializes and interacts with teachers are mostly the ones that face questions on religious practices.

All the research participants shared one or the other experience with being asked the question (innocent, ignorant and curious and sometimes insulting) in relation to the hijabs and face masks as 'neqaabs' they wore. Some of the questions are asked by the participants' classmates, while others are asked and or told by the teachers themselves. In each of the narratives, one can envision an undertone of predetermined judgements on religion and its practise.

Hijabi students perceive that non-Muslim persons are quite ignorant of Islamic practices and possess a distorted perception of 'why' Muslim women wear hijab.

Sirin pointed to "people's first quick thought" that appear when they see a woman in hijab, 'burga' and 'neqaab':

> "If I speak about college, then [paused and recalled] once during the time of admission for new sessions, I wore 'burga', 'neqaab' and hijab. The office clerk gave a 'quick glance' and answered all the queries. After the payment was made, the office clerk smilingly told me, I thought a married lady from the village came to inquire about the new sessions. But the way you talked smartly made me think who was behind the *purdah*. We didn't think it was you. You have changed your entire appearance. Has your marriage got fixed? I nodded negatively. I was in a hurry and did not feel the necessity to explain to him in detail as there were other students in the queue".

So, incorrect assumptions such as 'typical village married women', 'won't be able to verbally communicate in public places' 'limited English-speaking ability' (Bullock, 2003; Speck, 1997 cited in Cole & Ahmadi, 2003) gets mostly related to Muslim women when they wear 'burga' and 'neqaab'.

Fauzia describes being constantly asked about her sudden transformation into hijab and 'neqaab' by her teachers and peer groups. She explained the reason for such questioning to the researcher as their unfamiliarity with her turning points in life[8].

She further added:

> "Two of my teachers feel sorry for me because they openly shared their cognitive opinion that I was being threatened, scolded with having to wear the hijab and 'neqaab'. No matter how far I try to explain them, they do not understand. Sometimes, with respect, I respond to their inquiry based on what I had been taught or personally believed about my religion. In that case the teacher says, "see, she has learnt to answer back, which I find a sarcastic remark. So, now, most of the time I dramatically answer them back with a 'convincing explanation' that I am experiencing hair loss, so to keep my hair protected I cover my hair".

Toma also describes instances where one of the female teachers commented that uncovering her hair would make her feel 'free'.

"One day in the hallway, one of my female teachers was asking my well-being. When the conversation ended, she politely told me that she saw me as the most vocal student in her

[8] After the death of her father, she took the entire familial responsibility. So, she has to do all the work- from buying grocery items to all the official tasks. For her, hijab and neqaab is an enabling device that signals her purposive action in public space especially in bazar and offices without getting disturbed by the compulsive looks of men.

class, yet she was wondering why I took up hijab. Additionally, she was also saying that if I remove it, I will feel 'good', feel free and more modern. Bullock also informed of this kind of 'reassurance' received by her participants (Bullock, 2003, p. 41).

What the narratives amplify is the highly contextual reasons for their change of appearance, but the teachers and the office clerks made a strategic mistake by overlooking these parts and hence pigeonholed them as 'helpless women'. Such a highly 'oppressive' focus on Muslim women is not surprising given that brown women [Muslim women] constitute the long-standing imperial project of the white men to save them from brown men [Muslim men] (Amer, 2014).

Participants from the college shared that not all the teachers carry a stereotype baggage for Muslim students. There are some teachers who possess a cold attitude towards the Muslim students. Few of the hijabi students had an experience with such teachers, but the participants justify their interaction with such teacher as one or two times. The hijabi participants explained that most of the comments are harmless and are usually made by their friends and sometimes it is made by their 'favourite'[9] teacher. In no way does this imply that comments had no effect. Sumi, shared, "My friends are like *humse kya parda?* (why are you hiding yourself from us)", she says her friends were teasing her by saying this and this does not bother her, yet she expressed a concern that if repeatedly said, this might annoy others.

Five of the participants recalled that in summer season, sometimes when the temperature is extremely hot, many of them discard hijab cap, hijab pin and in a light manner drape the hijab. So sometimes it slips off from their head and their hair gets exposed. During one such moment, one of their favourite male teachers commented, "you look beautiful without hijab and when the class gets over, you grab your 'burga' (pointing to one of my friends) and wear it, you all look old. Why do you wear it? *Bhogoban* (Hindu God) has endowed you all with *sondor muk* (beautiful face) and *lomba chool* (long luscious tresses). How can you appreciate your beauty if you hide it?" As the researcher did not get the opportunity to talk with the teacher in question, she cannot precisely say what was going on in his mind when he remarked like this, but the conjectural understanding is that when the participants

[9] Participants quickly picked up on which teachers make an effort to interact with them, by what they said, what they taught, and how they acted, the guideline Muslims follow with respect to gender interaction, teachers who go beyond academic and care about students' lives.

wear hijab and the long loose dress, it disengages the teacher to look beyond their physical appearances. Thus, the sexual objectified comment 'long hair', 'beautiful face' made by the teacher reflects his extreme desperation to satisfy his temporary gratification by making the participant as sexual objects; and indeed, deliberate covering it up, it functions as a frustration and barrier to men's pleasure of compulsive gaze. The liberating effect of the hijab from the male gaze, and the role that the hijab can play to protect women from a capitalist consumer market and sexist society have also been highlighted in several studies (for example, see Hoodfar, 1993; Bullock, 2003; Ruby, 2006; Siraj, 2011).

Another participant also shared that comment made by one of her teachers about her religion, at times felt as insulting. This teacher, she narrates, knows her family very well. During her higher secondary days, she took science tuition from him, and he happened to be her college teacher as well. The professor, according to her, is student-friendly and possesses good understanding as he even once expressed his respect for the practice of fasting and even outlined its scientific significance. But when he saw her in hijab he asked, "Pakhi, you have never been like that? Suddenly why do you wrap a piece of cloth in your head? What is all the fuss about? I know your father. He is not conservative."

In another case, the same participant shared a blatant incident of 'name calling' by the same professor. One day she wore a hijab cap inside her hijab. It was the same teacher who saw her again and remarked: "Again! what you have worn this black thing under your [head] cloth? After some day you would become like one of those Al-Qaeda[10] (laughing)."

A teacher, in many ways, has the authority to make a student feel out of place. What the teacher has registered in his cognitive dimension is the various kinds of 'specific stigma term' associations with Muslim covering practices (Tarlo, 2010). And so, his mind is filled with images linked to radicalism, which in other words, made Pakhi felt "on the spot." Though the teacher's intentions at first seemed innocent to the participant, the way he made the comment made her feel uncomfortable, she adds. But there is something else at stake, inherent in the binary thinking of the teacher on Pakhi's family [her father is not conservative] explains two noteworthy things: First in situating hijab as the people who

[10] According to Britannica, Al-Qaeda is a broad-based militant Islamist organization founded by Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s and became one of the world's most notorious terrorist organizations after carrying out the attacks of September 11, 2001. source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda

are conservative wears it; the teacher attaches fixed meaning into it and by making such unwitting claim he is dismissing her decision and action to take up hijab as lacking of her agency; thus denying her personhood. Hoodfar (2001) also challenges the persistent stereotypes about veiled Muslim women. Highlighting the lived experiences of veiled Muslim women as well as their agencies, she notes that 'the static colonial image of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman thus often contrasts sharply with women's lived experience of veiling. To deny this is also to deny Muslim women their agency' (Hoodfar, 2001, p. 5).

Another participant recollected that, once their teacher cracked a joke which goes on like this, "due to corona, like all of you, I too have to wear *neqaab* (metaphorically he is referring surgical mask as neqaab)". During the days of COVID-19, people wore protective masks which signified compliance with the health and public safety of the masses. Not wearing it jeopardizes ones as well as others' health. By comparing Muslim women's 'neqaab' with the surgical mask, the teacher, like every other political leader, reinforces the hypocrisy 'irony' trope of countries such as France which have banned Muslim women's face coverings in public space as a barrier to social inclusion.

Jannat shared that comments made by friends about her religion are at times felt to be frustrating and hurtful. She said that "I never thought that someday I have to face questions on my religion because such kind of question "why you do that" and "why not this", I have never faced in my school life. For the non-performer it is a religion of dos and don'ts".

> "I have few non-Muslim friends, and they are like, "We don't understand your [Islam] religion." … and then if I answer some of their queries, they will always say right to my face that, "Oh, your religion is extremely rigid. Why can't you make progress with time? There are dos and don'ts in your religion. For example, you can't drink, you have to dress in a specific way you're not allowed to have a relationship before marriage." And then when I told them not everybody follows this. Then they say, "be like them, be like us".

Perhaps more illuminating in such commentaries of Islamic practices as 'rigid' and 'backward', there is a prevailing sense among some quarter section of people who wishes to subscribe to the dominant and hegemonic view of 'us versus them' thus simply succumbing to the political polarized narrative.

For the stigmatized participants, the questions are brought into being in social encounters during mixed contacts by virtue of the unrealized normative norms that play upon the encounter. The participants find themselves in an arena of detailed questioning and comments concerning what they ought to think of themselves, which, in effect results in constant justification, explanation and defense of their self-made decision to wear hijab. Practicing a religion and its rituals does not mean one understands the reasons behind its performance. Many adult Muslims around the worlds, not to speak of adolescents, have inadequate knowledge of Islam and achievements of Muslim's historical events. Being uninformed about the reasons, one performs certain Islamic practices, and this puts Muslims at a disadvantage. Some even feel a sense of responsibility to explain those who wanted to know about their religion and hijabs.

Meena explains that she was asked to clear the query why in her group, four of her friends wore hijab and the other one didn't wear it.

> "My non-Muslim friend wonders why our other one friend did not wear hijab? Like we sit together in class, and when our classes get over, we leave together, they ask why you wear this, and why your friend doesn't wear hijab. I told them that when she is ready to give, she will give. I cannot force her to wear hijab now because our Quran says that there is no compulsion in religion, and I'am following that."

Instead of asking why her friend Umaiya wears hijab, her Christian male classmate wanted to know specific details on the regulations for wearing hijab, as in under what circumstances one can or cannot wear it.

Nafeesha, Suma, and Ana explain how they were asked 'insensitive questions' by their teachers:

> "Some of our teachers asked some of us insensitive questions, suddenly why are you wearing like this? Is your family forcing you to cover it? Do you believe that your Quran tells you to cover it? Don't you feel hot? And sometimes we just respond with the short answers, "yes, this is what our religion told us to do, so I am wearing this." And sometimes we don't feel like constantly responding to them certain aspects of our religion because the more we talk the more they argue. It becomes embarrassing as well as frustrating for us as we fail to provide them with *'moo thod jawab'* (jaw breaking reply) because we cannot discuss Islam in an intellectual manner like the Islamic intellectuals do nor can we

provide them with satisfactory and convincing answers like the scholars who answer the peoples' queries on YouTube and Instagram".

4.4.2 Managing stigma - Coping strategy of hijabi students

The anticipation of mixed contacts in public life can of course in effect lead normal and stigmatized to rearrange life situation which makes such a high degree coping strategy possible (Goffman, 1963). For the most part, the issue of managing stigma arises to manage the tensions and information generated during social contacts both within and outside the classroom. Students view the process of managing the stigma as playing a positive role in their constructive process of engaging and relearning religion. As Hoodfar argues, "the assumption that the veil equals ignorance and oppression has meant that young Muslim women have to invest a considerable amount of energy in establishing themselves as thinking, rationale, literate students/persons, both in their classrooms and outside" (Hoodfar, 2001, p. 5). As noted in the previous sections, the participants are frequently questioned about their religious practices. Questions which sound insensitive and insulting to them and which put them on the spot. This resulted in participants expressing frustrations. Ali (2012) noted the frustrations Muslim girls experience with having to answer questions from their peers. In the case of the present research participants, the radical truth is that they did share the same level of frustration as many of the girls in these academic pieces noted. How the question is placed, who asked the question; and to whom the questions are asked to, influence their response to the questions.

Thus, to reduce stereotypes and misconceptions around the religion and the people who practice it, other than presenting brief "preposterous explanations" that has the possibility to terminate an unwanted social interaction (Goffman, 1963), the next sections discuss the techniques hijabi participants adopt to manage stigma:

4.4.2.1 Silencing self and ignore

Regarding social relationships, instead of withdrawal from them, participants describe how they attempted to react to others if they found themselves in an uncomfortable situation. Many of the young participants explained that even if negative comment, a strange and odd look, or any other such action by their acquaintances made them angry or upset, they try not to respond because they did not want to reinforce negative stereotypes about

Muslims as ‘aggressive’ or ‘violent’ as shown in media (Peek, 2005). Instead, they stay mute, smile, and ignore each other. It must be noted that the stigma category, ‘silence Muslim women’ is a trope that signifies disempowered women and her submissiveness to patriarchal system and used in reference to their inability to speak out and/or act against gendered oppressive situations (Gatwiri & Mumbi, 2016). However, the use of soft power ‘silence’ utilized by the stigmatized student can lead to “secondary gains” (Goffman, 1963) as it is used as a coping mechanism in the highly polarized environment in which they are now living; in order to protect themselves when minority, everywhere faces hostility.

4.4.2.2 Engaging with the online content

There are other participants who communicated to the researcher that they are likely to offer information about their religion by taking and sharing contents from Instagram and YouTube and posting these as WhatsApp status and Instagram stories. As noted, participants are required to explain and sometimes combat the negative stereotypes prevailing among their peers and teachers. This gives them the intellectual opportunity to educate and inform non-Muslim what it means to practice Islam, including the importance of proper dress.

> “Sometimes I post something that is in exact line with the discussions that happened with my friend today. For instance, the case of Karnataka’s Muskan Khan and Iran’s case… [Mahsa Amin]. So, one of my friends was asking question like - you all are Muslim right? Then why in Iran, women are chopping off their hair, burning hijab and here in India, you are trying to hold on to it. Of course I was not able to properly answer it. This made me question myself and I studied to find out the reason behind the Iran’s protest. So, I understood that there [Iran] is Government enforced and here we are free to practice it. But our government is also behaving like the White countries, attempting to curb it. So, the common ground is anything enforced results in protest.”

“I post short Islamic reel [sermon] that contains messages which can be easily fathomed by anyone. Those messages contain real-world examples relate to the daily lives of Muslims. The atmosphere of the Islamic reel contains humour and conveyed in a friendly way by the religious teachers”.

Another says, “I posted Muskan Khan’s image in both my social media account to extend my support of wearing hijab in college”.

Participants mentioned that in the initial days of their opening of Instagram account, the focus of most of the participants in this study was for entertainment purpose. Later on, the participants utilize the visual based platform to increase their knowledge of Islamic teachings. As already noted in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 will demonstrate, the participants pointed out that Instagram has become a learning platform where young adult participants watch and learn as well as unlearn things about Islam and how they link the teachings with the broader aspect of social life.

Participants mention that to defy the stereotypes they refrain from using provocative videos or quotes, rather they opt to combine simple quotes, famous motivational watchwords with images, as their substance of message. Therefore, their gentle and soft message approaches in their social media postings such as Instagram are dominated by their everyday experiences, interpretations, and enactments of their religious beliefs. These participants utilize the social media seriously by sharing the Quran verses, hadiths, or religious quotes to educate people around them and dispel the myths surrounded with the religion. The awareness that their status and stories are often seen by their contact users and friends means that they carefully publicize on their social media pages (Busabaa et. al., 2022).

Therefore, the participants' strategy in correcting the stereotypes and explaining their beliefs, feelings and identities in a deliberate pedagogical form; utilizing the social media platform as 'announcements of religious, social, political issues' (Busabaa et al., 2022) has been termed as 'educational accounting' (Gurbuz & Gurbuz-Kucuksari, 2009), which is akin to performing *dawa*. The practices of the participants resonate with the findings of Adlene Aris and Fauziah Hassan (2016) whose content analysis of two female Muslim celebrities, where the author found that they too spread Islamic messages through their social media platform. Social media is a platform where dawah could take place in protecting Islam and in ensuring that people acquire truthful knowledge about Islam (Aris & Hassan, 2016). In other words, they follow the Islamic principle "Convey from me even if it is one verse" as stated by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Some of the participants also mentioned drawbacks to such posting. Although the intention is to educate people, few of them have faced counter-reactionary label of "being too religious". Nevertheless, the stigmatized trial they experience is not disempowering, rather

what it is felt that they use the label of stigma as a blessing in disguise - to educate themselves as well as others; given the negativity all around.

4.5 Teacher narratives on Muslim female students - what the teacher says

Most of the teachers the researcher interviewed, mentioned statements like: *chatro toh chatro o* (students are students), "we want good results from students," or "I do not treat my students on the basis of religion or any religious marker." When the researcher asked what the challenges of student community in general are, followed by what the challenges of Muslim students particularly the women students, the response from the teacher was that they had the same struggles as all the other students. Other teachers commented that 'specific challenges' are not exclusive to one particular *dhormor manush* (community of faith). Only a handful of teachers were comfortable to assert their subjective positions when talking about Muslim students. The next subsection highlights the teachers' narratives:

4.5.1 Perceptions of teachers on Muslim women students - the puzzling issue

In this sub-section, the researcher reports on teacher's own perceptions about Muslim women students. These teachers have been working in this college for a very long time, and the girls' college has a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence - for at least the past few years - according to some of the teachers. The co-ed and girls' college both have diverse student population. In fact, few of the teachers are alumni of these two colleges and are now holding the teacher's position in the same college. A few female teachers reminisced their college times that, "we also have few Muslim friends, but they never covered their head. When they entered college, they used to leave their *unna* outside. But currently the practise of hijab and covering head with *unna* among college students has increased gradually. Even COVID got over, still they wear face mask. Now without asking their name we can say that they are Muslim [asking other colleagues for their approval, to which they burst into laughter and unanimously nodded]".

Head-covering in India has a long history of local and regional linkages but the moment a Muslim woman wears a head-cover, it gets associated with her religiousness, eventually creating an illusion of social distantness, and justifying the alienness of new clothing items. So, instead of looking the change in clothes as another transnational phenomenon, the idea

of the female teacher on Muslim head-covering practices as a mark of identity reflects a similar statement [indicating Muslims] made by Prime Minister Modi on December 2019 on anti-CAA protests, "those who were protesting violently against the new Act could be recognised by their clothes" (The Wire, 2019).[11] Such expressive statement used by the top political leader of the country and broadcast by media shows how the national discourse on Muslim women permeates and give fodder to the local contexts (Hussain, 2019; Gupta, 2015).

Another teacher quotes, "we are getting modern, we also cover our head in certain occasions but not always. They cover their head always and do not discard the practise of head-covering".

One of the female teachers asserted, "I am sure these students are forced by their families to wear hijab". When asked if this was what she thought of most of the hijabi students, she modified her answer by saying that "the [honours] student of my class, in the beginning of their semester classes, one or two students wear hijab and other cover their head with *unna.* By the time they reach their final year their fellow classmates also join them in wearing hijab. I think this is peer imitation". To better understand this self-proclaimed assertion, it is important to highlight the social informing characterization of hijab wearers and its relationship 'of being seen with' the non-hijab Muslim peers (Goffman, 1963).

Another teacher [outside of Barak valley] remarked that he noticed that on hearing the *azaan*, few of the students would cover their heads as a reflex even while he is delivering lectures in the class. It left him wondering as he could not fathom the reason why they do this.

Another male teacher from Co-ed College went as far to express that, *'something extreme happening underneath'* (emphasized by the teacher). The researcher, unable to fathom what the teacher meant, asked further to clarify the statement. To which the teacher smirked and asked the researcher to identify by herself. It simply turned out that any expression of Muslim identity is bound to be interpreted in clear political terms. The teachers' expression is in tune with the Karnataka High court judgement reported in the

[11]https://thewire.in/communalism/narendra-modi-citizenship-amendment-act-protests-clothes

media. It reports that the way hijab imbroglio has unfolded gives scope for the argument that some unseen hands are choreographing social unrest and disharmony (Ahmed, 2022).

Even the Muslim male teachers call the Muslim students who wears hijab as caught with 'hijab flu', terming it as contagious fashion that the college students are adopting because their friends wear it. "They are not even aware of its intrinsic and divine meaning. They are simply insulting its value by going out with the opposite gender and doing what not (sexually)". It seems that the teachers are unaware and ignorant of the fact that even when Muslims live in close proximity to one another their cultures, beliefs, opinions, thoughts, lived experiences, educational backgrounds, dress code, and so on, vary tremendously[12].

Other teachers point out their behavioral and co-curricular aspect such as, they are 'silent' in class, they do not participate in dance, drama, their families are protective and restrictive. One teacher hesitantly mentioned that he has observed parents, or any family members accompany few Muslim female students who arrives in college in their private vehicle. Nonetheless, the few women students who are accompanied by their family members seems to go beyond the idea of 'protection' and 'restriction' as implied by the teacher. On the other hand, it was a matter of convenience and economical as bringing their daughter in private vehicle on their way to work would be easier than providing them with auto and *tuk tuk* fares in case of inclement weather and ill health. However, the majority of Muslim students in the sample could be seen using auto or *tuk tuk* to go to home after the college gets over.

Considering these negative stereotypes of Muslim women students, it was a surprise to find teachers who also spoke that they encountered "outspoken and ambitious" Muslim women students in their class. Students, Muslim women as such, they do partake in debate, extempore speech, group song and social work activity. What does this mean in the midst of all these illustrative statements of their negative circumstances? That their minor accomplishments are assessed as a sign of noteworthy capacities. At the same time, the Muslim students who do not participate in any college function, their non-participation is more or less taken as a direct expression of the familial or religious opposition and /or restriction. Whereas if a non-Muslim student does not participate in the college events,

[12] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/

their non-involvement is not taken as a symptomatic of anything in particular (Goffman, 1963).

Clearly the teachers' interviews portray general blanket statements about Muslims. The exact words and phrases of the teachers to explain the negative stereotypes about Muslim women prevailing in the colleges of Karimganj are "they get married early", "they do not have voice of their own", "they are polite and listen to their parents", "they are not athlete" "they cover all the time". These one-size-fits-all associated images of stereotype portray a standardized normative picture of Muslim women and blindly ignores the diverse background, contexts and situations from which Muslim women comes and adopts head-covering practices accordingly [details discussed in chapter 3].

Looking deeply into the teacher's narrative manifests a marked 'pathological/religious and 'secular self and other dichotomy' discourse that associates certain type of dressing with a dominant religiosity or lack of that (Hussain, 2019; Hussain 2023). Similarly, Dwyer's work on British Muslim women's dressing shows that "dressing comes to be used as a signifier for essentialized and oppositional identities", the acceptable 'normative' identity vs. the unacceptable 'other' (Dwyer, 1999, p. 6). The act of forsaking *unna* by their friends outside the college gate as reported by the teachers has also been reported to the researcher by the participants' mothers, some of whom studied in this college. The participants' mother recalled that the general perception of covering head outside home symbolized a woman from rural area lacking education and thus "what really hold them back" was the expected territorial norms of the rural-urban dichotomy attached to one's dress. Thus, to avoid the stigma, head-covering was confined to one's home unless one appears with it in the public sphere as a temporary feature to avoid the gaze of fellow people. Further, the participants' mother's experience of using *unna* highlights that they want to access what Goffman calls (1963, p. 74) are the great rewards for being considered normal.

Other participants' mothers informed the researcher that as there were few Muslim students and an 'uncertain' fear was there if they cover head then they would draw attention of *sir-madam*[13]. So, the unsure feelings of how the 'normal' would treat them and their knowing in their heart of drawing stigmatized attention from everyone, hence due to

[13] The honorific title of respect 'sir-madam' is used colloquially by the participants' mother to convey the idea of teachers.

ambivalent situation no one used to cover their head inside the college. Thus, the teacher comparing their friends act of uncovering with the contemporary increase of head-covering practices inside the college campus points to the post-colonial framework of secular identity which is understood as Indian identity camouflaged as Hindu normative value where the distinct identity categories - Muslim and Hindu are juxtaposed with 'religious' and 'secular' (Hussain, 2019).

Additionally, the college provides a space in which the middle-class habitus of hijabis are reconstructed and validated. The interplay between a 'women from a good Muslim family' and a hijabi college student is quite dense and has hardly any room for inconsistencies. The all-girls college is in proximity with the physical 'objectivations' (Berger, 1967) of their religions such as mosques, hence the call from mosques and the instant covering of head with *unna* simultaneously functions as a status transformation in reproducing the behaviour learnt at home.

The idea that 'to become modern' means abandoning religious practices reveals modernity's 'mass crisis of identity' where one is faced with the need 'to become what one is' (Gurbuz & Gurbuz Kucuksari, 2009). As is clear from the above discussions, the teacher in their stereotypical myopia doesn't see all this. Instead, it frames the participants' differences as deficits. And society's unspoken rulebook demands that "before an undesired differentness matters even further, it must be unequivocally conceptualized by the society" (Goffman, 1963, p. 123).

4.6 The Hijab Ban controversy and its implications on the students (As with writing this section the ban is still in effect)

Geographically apart the hijab ban incident in one of the educational institutions in Udupi district of Karnataka started in early 2022, where students were directly impacted by the deliberate decision of the stakeholder. Here, in Karimganj though the students were not directly affected by the popular discourse on controversial ban, the section would highlight the parents', teachers' and participants' concern of the impact that this ban had ensue. The country's polarized political climate is already plagued with contentious issues[14] related to

[14] https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/view-from-greater-kailash-give-them-back-their-hijab-and-education

anti-Muslim sentiment with visual images of verbal hate speech, lynching and restriction on specific culinary items.

Following the ban on wearing of hijab, participants' mother's express heightened fear of the safety of their daughters. Although no parents reported altering the dress of their daughter, they made sure that their daughters abstained from publicly expressing their political views. Further, few parents also indicated that if any teacher talks about [Muslim] politics, which you do not possess accurate knowledge and if the question is being directed to you then either you politely accept your ignorance or tell them you will read on it, instead of debating with the teacher. Other participants informed the researcher that their mothers told them to focus on exams and percentage.

However, the participants expressed that under current hostile circumstances, inside and outside classrooms, they did not face any 'new' issues. But subtle micro changes in social interaction they have noticed among their friends. One participant from Co-ed College reported to the researcher,

> "I am studying in this college since class XI. Now I am in my degree second year. All these years I haven't taken hijab or cover my head with *unna*. I started taking hijab in the mid of 2022. My male classmates said directly on my face that I have become religious. Instead of knowing the reason behind my decision to take hijab they just assumed on their own. I tried to explain from my own side that the reason holds beyond religious motive. But they just stick to their own self-made assumption".

Taking stock of such dominating quotes underpins continuity with the general prevalent notions rooted in Hindutva ideology.

In a hypothetical way when the researcher asked if such ban gets implemented in the educational institute, then what are the viable options they could think of? To which half of the participant buttressed their right to constitutional democratic rights such as, "India is a secular country", "the right to practice their religion", others gave more pragmatic reasons that of hijab as not harming or hurting anyone and refuse to box themselves in the *hijab vs. kitab* binary framework. Their articulation of democratic vocabulary also draws from the wider social media experience. The viral video of a lone young woman Muskan Khan's defiant action has earned appreciation from the students when she pronounced, *Allahu Akbar* (Allah is the greatest) while facing mob of young saffron clad men who

repetitively heckled her as she walked into her college campus in Karnataka's Mandya district (DNA India News, 2022; cited in Hussain, 2023). Viewed in this way, the language of upholding constitutional values in the quotes of the hijabi students of Karimganj explains their commitment to constitutional values and democracy as 'political agent' as noted by Saba Hussain (2023).

In comparison to the students who refuse to choose education over hijab and vice versa, a handful of participants choose to sacrifice their religious marker for educational accomplishments[15], an insight which resonates with Saba Hussain's analysis of media reported material in her article "Feminist counter-authoritarian political agency: Muslim girls re-generating politics in India" (2023). Speaking of fighting for the right to wear hijab, one college women pointed out that to fight for constitutional right, familial or strong [social capital] support is needed. This echoes with Hussain who highlighted that girls from privileged families can continue with their resistance against the policy on uniform in ways that girls' from economically disadvantaged backgrounds cannot (Hussain, 2023). The remainder of her narratives goes on to highlight the fundamental premise of every Muslim family is, study hard, get good grades, and refrain from college politics. The attempt of the parents in structuring the lives of the participants solely around academic aspirations and refraining them from participating or voicing out their opinion on matters related to visible symbols, rituals and practice college stems from the wider violent attack carried out on Muslims by Hindu majoritarianism (Hussain, 2023). Further, the varying response among the participants to hijab issue calls attention to a wide range of circumstances, outlooks, and motivations among hijabi participants and their families, thus posing a challenge to the shared worldview of Muslim community as monolithic.

With respect to the teacher's treatment towards participants, they reported that their teachers urged them to adhere to college uniform guideline rules. The Co-ed College participants reported that the college prospectus mentions the provision to wear 'headscarf' and 'dupatta' and which must go hand in hand with the colour code of college uniform. Whereas the participants of the all-girls college reported that their prospectus nowhere mentions of headscarf. Thus, while in this college where no specified headscarf is mentioned, participants wear headscarf as a matter of unwritten rule. Nevertheless, the

[15] Participants seemingly different response to their habitual practices suggest the fluidity of covering practices.

teacher's expectations of the headscarf are related to the acceptable college uniform colour in order for the wearer to remain as inconspicuous as possible, as directly expressed by one teacher to the researcher. This teacher from the all-girls college, her point, which other teachers also shared, was about colourful hijab worn by the students'. Interestingly participants report of "feeling good", "finds pleasure" in their change in hijab colour, which illustrates the subversion of powerful regulated hegemonic discourses. However, the institutional constraints effectively place limit on the possibilities of their choice of hijab colour. These two colleges where these participants are studying have a policy of reasonable accommodation just like Kendriya Vidyalayas in India which accommodates hijab in their school rulebook (Sharma & Bhaskaran, 2022).

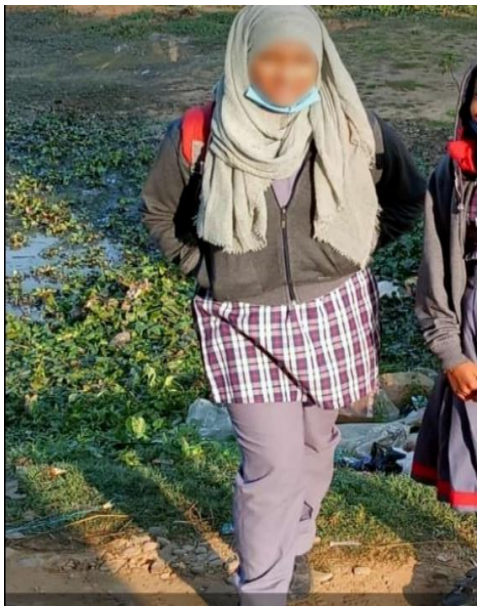

Image 4.10: Participant's younger sister studying in Karimganj's Kendriya Vidyalaya

Another student pointed out that the probable cause of not receiving any backlash from teachers is because of the college's accommodative nature of the diverse student from different socio-economic, cultural and religious milieu. Although each research participant is a female hijabi student whose lived experiences differed in many ways. That said, the consensus is that being a hijabi student in both colleges did not present any conspicuous challenges. On the contrary, overall participants described classroom and college spaces

as positive, and interactions within and across these settings, they identified as accepting, and respectful, although sometimes a “feeling of difference” can be felt.

Teachers, also, alluded that if a ban is allowed, then Muslim students as such who come from remote places would be most affected as the gate of education would get closed for them. Muslim women’s negotiations with the symbolic value of hijab are circumscribed by the everyday inner diverse circumstances within and across Muslim families and community in which they inhabit.

Image 4.11: participants with their ‘favourite’ teacher

4.7 Conclusion

The chapter begins with the story of three college student participants whose narratives differ in contexts, yet they provide a useful starting point to think about ‘forceful imposition’ and ‘willingness to take up’ their choice of clothing. The cases clearly demonstrated that they have asserted their agency in their clear pronouncements of sartorial decisions. However, the cases manifested that initially to their journey to hijab, they face casual questions from the family settings. The fact that they have faced some sort of questioning is sufficient to unsettle the stereotyped view that they are being driven to wear hijab by their kin.

Moving further, the narratives also highlighted ‘what is normal’ and ‘what is stigmatized’ in the eyes of masses pertaining to dominant discourse on ‘standard dresses’ inhabiting certain spaces. In this instance, it was a powerful visual imagery to experience its reactions on those around the wearers. It has been noted that there is a constant tendency among

peers and teachers to question their religious practices specific to hijab. This is because the moment of 'mixed contacts' generate the effect of stigma symbol as 'fundamental' and 'oppressed' (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003) that must be confronted directly by both the parties - normal and stigmatized.

Since life in college involves beyond academic adjustment and encompasses social bonds such as friendships and romantic relationships (Naparan & Balimbingan, 2020), the narratives highlighted that they are torn between the need to become 'normal - to fit in' and their desire 'to become who they are'. Hijabi participants reported that they choose 'like-minded' friends which acts as primary 'affective' support system (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Just as some of them are generally drawn to other hijabis whom they could relate with, there are others who are able to find at least one or two friends who fit their 'general' criteria - obeying family rules, seriousness towards academic, and childhood school friends.

That being said, the act of exiting home and entering college, everyday opens up the outer world to an extent that the parents disapprove of. This disapproval of outer world consists of all kinds of 'new' social relations - "male classmates as brothers", which is not covered by incest taboo. The participants describe beliefs and challenges of being friends with male classmates – parents need to accept; the friendship is contextual depending on 'where' they are and 'who they are with'. Indeed, their lived experiences showcased the 'desirable' and 'undesirable' options that exist while they stay in college and what to embrace and what to reject depends on 'everybody has a choice'.

While discussing their friendships and relationships with teachers and peers, hijabi participants got to experience negative perceptions on their hijab which encapsulates their overall lived experiences. In their everyday life, students recall incidents of teachers who view the students who wear hijab and face-mask (as neqaab) more cynically, which reflects in their demeaning behaviour, labelling, jokes highlighted with suspicious tone, snubbing and cynical looks in their interaction which of course puts the students in discomfort and even makes them frustrated. This is what Babacan (2023) calls "microaggression" which appears in a subtle way in mundane interactions. While participants' narratives suggest that their visibility with hijab made them susceptible to judgmental stares and presumptive comments, questions and feedback; it's in all these critical [direct and indirect] moments

that eventually makes them to adopt coping strategies. The irony by adopting which, some participants avoid confrontational moments; others try to educate their peers.

Thus far, the chapter sheds light on the lived experience of participants with their teachers and peers spelling out different narratives. The following section digs deeper into teacher's narratives, and which extends and directly correlates with what participants experienced in their college campus. Teacher's lack of knowledge on Islamic beliefs, values and practices became obvious in the interview data. Furthermore, some teachers hold strong stigmatization towards hijabis which are based on assumptions. Not-so-well-informed approach towards Islam or hijabis for that matter is not exclusively a teacher issue. It is a broader issue transcending borders and has its roots in the colonization of Middle East and media coverage (Ahmed, 1992; Bullock, 2003; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Ruby, 2006). A final point with which the chapter ends is shedding light on the effects of the hijab controversy in the lives of the hijabi participants. The fact that participants of the present study significantly did not face any hostile humiliation or outright exclusion within and outside classroom yet in tide of negative media and public outcry, it was no wonder to hear from their parents exercising acute cautiousness in general at a time when Muslims were increasingly targeted for abuse and attack. Like critics of hijab controversy, the hijabis are constantly found to be speaking on their constitutional rights.

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