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Surviving Violence, Contesting Victimhood: Communal Politics and the Creation of Child-Men in an Urban Indian Slum

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of violent child identity politics in a communally sensitive urban slum in Hyderabad, a city in southern India. My ethnographic landscape is Sultanpur, a Muslim-dominated ghetto in the northern quarters of Hyderabad, which has been marked by decades of hostilities between local Hindus and Muslims. These tensions had everyday and extreme manifestations (ranging from quotidian expressions of symbolic violence to rioting, looting and bomb blasts) which increased the vulnerabilities of Muslim male children in the slums; the latter being humiliated by ordinary passers-by in times of peace, and at other times being attacked by rioting mobs. To counter their victimhood and organise their own retribution, sections of local boys in Sultanpur, aged between 9 and 14 years, co-ordinated themselves into child squads (*bacchon ke fauj*). These child vigilantes patrolled the slum borders and common public places, constantly establishing a disciplinary control over fragile aspects of ghetto life. For example, the male child squads not only aggressively prevented members of other communities from entering the slum, they also monitored the movement of Sultanpur-wallahs, often physically assaulting local women who were caught having affairs with Hindu men. In my paper I show how the power, presence and practices of these child squads upturned traditional structures of male and female authority, contested conventional notions of male childhood in a volatile urban space, and sustained

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nascent masculinities within the moral and social economy of impoverished Muslim male children.

Keywords: City, slums, communalism, violence, child vigilantism

Introduction

They called me a whore, they called me a witch, I remained silent, but when they grabbed my wrist and slapped me in front of everyone, I wailed and said ‘Someone return my small sons to me, they have become my husband, my father’. Now my relationship with my sons is like my association with that crow. That bloody bird comes to me for food and drinks, has no loyalty, no love, just fluffs his scruffy, grey neck and gives me dirty looks.

Salima (who had been abandoned by her father at an early age, and later by her husband) and I were both sitting on the steps of her slum home in the scorching Hyderabad sun, gazing at the mean crow perched on her asbestos roof. The scavenging bird blinked back at us with an equal measure of distrust.

This paper explores the effects of poverty and communal tensions on child identity politics in an urban slum. My ethnographic landscape is Sultanpur, a communally-sensitive Muslim-dominated slum in the northern quarters of Hyderabad, a city in southern India, which has recently witnessed the emergence of armed vigilantism among male children. Large numbers of the local boys aged between 9 and 14 years had co-ordinated themselves into child squads (*bacchon ke fauj*) to patrol the slum borders and establish disciplinary control over certain aspects of slum life. For example, the child squads not only prevented members of other communities (nationalistic Hindus, peace mediators, Hindu NGO workers, secular Hindus desiring access to the local *dargahs*, etc),¹ from entering or passing through the slum, they also acted as deliverers of social justice by organising public beatings of Muslim women like Salima, who was accused of having a ‘love-alliance’ with non-Muslims. In this paper I argue that the power, presence and practices of the child squads have upturned, however temporarily, traditional structures of male and female authority, and have contested conventional notions of boyhood in a volatile

¹ The children even chased away unfamiliar Muslim ‘outsiders’.

urban space. I show that social, sexual and physical attacks on the 'muted male-ness' of a poor Muslim community, and the everyday deprivations faced by slum children, gave birth to discourses around nascent child masculinities; the latter were sustained within the moral and social economy of impoverished male children, and the boys justified the adoption of violent collective identities to compensate for the loss of male pride in the adult-child world.

Most of the literature, academic and non-academic, on the impact of sustained and symbolic violence on children in South Asia remains focused on child labour, the challenges of child marriage, children's health, nutrition and education, foeticide and infanticide, legal studies, delinquency and child crime, and street children and rehabilitation, psychoanalysis and child abuse, which has led to a proliferation of child studies and child-focused NGOs in the region.² These studies build primarily on the framework of child vulnerability, and introduce empowerment debates into 'reform and remedy' strategies for poor children. Violent and armed male children are found in the chronicles of war zones. The analysis of child soldiering in Sri Lanka (in the LTTE), Burma (in the National Army) and Nepal (in the Maoist movement) highlights the loss of psycho-social and sexual innocence among male children.³ This genre of research brings forth experiences of male child initiation into hyper-masculine discourses, and explores why children take up arms to protect themselves or provide for their

² M.Lall, 'Educate to Hate—The Use of Education in the Creation of Antagonistic National Identities in India and Pakistan', in *Compare*, Vol.38, no.1 (2008), pp.103–20; Sarada Balagopalan, 'Memories of Tomorrow: Children, Labor and the Panacea of Formal Schooling', in *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, Vol.1, no.2 (2008), pp.267–85; Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffery, 'Investing in the Future: Education in the Social and Cultural Reproduction of Muslims in UP', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Living with Secularism: The Destiny of India's Muslims* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007), pp.63–89; Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffery, 'When Schooling Fails: Young Men, Education and Low-Caste Politics in Rural North India', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.39, no.1 (2005), pp.1–38; Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffery, 'From Sir Syed to Sachar: Muslims and Education in Rural Bijnor', in *Indian Journal of Secularism*, Vol.11, no.2 (2007), pp.1–35; Pinki Virani, *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000); Myron Weiner, *The Child and the State in India: Child Labor and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Jaya Sagade, *Child Marriage in India: Socio-Legal and Human Rights Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and S. Sudha and S.I. Rajan, 'Female Demographic Disadvantage in India 1981–1991: Sex Selective Abortions and Female Infanticide', in *Development and Change*, No.30 (1999), pp.585–618.

³ Pushpa Kanagaratnam, Magne Raundalen and Arve E. Asbjørnsen, 'Ideological Commitment and Posttraumatic Stress in Former Tamil Child Soldiers', in *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, Vol.46, no.6 (2005), pp.511–20; Brandon A. Kohrt, Mark J.D. Jordans, Wietse A. Tol, Rebecca A. Speckman, Sujen M. Maharjan, Carol M. Worthman and Ivan H. Komproe, 'Comparison of Mental Health Between Former Child Soldiers and Children Never Conscribed by Armed Groups in Nepal', in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol.300, no.6 (2008), pp.691–702; H. de Silva, H.C. Hobbs and H. Hanks, 'Conscription of Children in Armed Conflict—A Form of Child Abuse: A Study of 19 Former Child Soldiers', in *Child Abuse Review*, Vol.10, no.2 (2001), pp.125–34; and J. Becker, T. Thapa and Z. Coursen-Neff, 'Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka', *Human Rights Watch*, Vol.16, no.13 (2004), pp.24–8.

families. The contentious literature within this genre draws out the dangers of marking all violent children as ‘victims’, which undermines children’s capacity to observe and encounter social phenomena, and act in response to it.⁴

Below, I open an ethnographic window into the lives of a cluster of self-styled child squads, whose members were *neither* forcibly nor voluntarily recruited into state-sponsored or anti-state political movements, *nor* were they exposed to civil/total war in their region. I use the lens of child masculinity to show how decrepit, communally-fragmented urban spaces, characterised by desperate attempts by poor families to survive their broken lives, generated concerns about counter-violence and survival among male children.

Across disciplines, studies on gender and conflict in South Asia have emphasised women’s victimhood in battle zones. Most research, however, has centred on women’s vulnerability to sexual assault from ‘the others’, and later to violent husbands frustrated by experiences of communal conflict.⁵ The body of research which explores child soldiering in civil war zones argues that boys’ hostility to their own families stemmed from prolonged periods of formal training in military camps, and alienation from mainstream social life. My paper shows how informal urban child vigilantism emerged not from physical, social and emotional torture and manipulation by influential nationalist leaders, but from a complex yet dynamic child agency within a socially-isolating urban setting. I offer a perspective on poor women’s despair at being subjected to organised violence inflicted by their own children, which prevented them from carrying out roles as peace-makers, maternal healers, providers of food security and cultural anchors. My paper argues further that these newly-emerging violent child identities impacted on traditional, valued masculinities and femininities in an urban slum.

This study also has a set of implications for social and policy research on young masculinities and conflict within Muslim communities in non-Western

⁴ Joanna de Berry and Jo Boyden (eds), *Children and Youth on the Front Line: Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); and David M. Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (Piscataway N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁵ Malathi de Alwis, ‘Motherhood as a Space of Protest: Women’s Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka’, in Paula Banerjee (ed.), *Women in Peace Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), pp.152–74; Nayanika Mookherjee, ‘Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh’, in *Feminist Review*, Vol.88, no.1 (2008), pp.36–53; Veena Das, *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); Taisha Abraham (ed.), *Women and the Politics of Violence* (New Delhi: Shakti Books, 2002); S.J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and N. De Mel, ‘Fractured Narratives: Notes on Women in Conflict in Sri Lanka and Pakistan’, in *Development*, Vol.45, no.1 (2002), pp.99–104.

countries. While most literature on Islam, displacement and transitional adolescence suggests intricate correlations between masculinities and religious nationalism,⁶ my ethnography highlights the ways in which some local Muslim child squads rejected religious tags (such as *jehadis*), and resisted the influence of religious and political leaders who attempted to glorify child violence as modern, metropolitan neo-terrorism. These forms of child rebellion against media-propagated images of Islam and organised violence are discussed along the course of this paper, and I show how a nuanced, more fragile form of child masculinity surfaced in a communally-tense socio-political landscape.

The Violent Children of Sultanpur: A Brief Backdrop

In 2005/6, I conducted research in a Muslim-dominated slum in the northern quarters of Hyderabad, which I call Sultanpur.⁷ According to its inhabitants this ghetto, located close to the Charminar,⁸ one of the city's chief tourist attractions, housed approximately 10,000 Urdu-speaking Muslim families (although the local municipal corporation pegged the number closer to 30,000). The area was organised into a neatly-structured grid of brick-walled shanties, and relatively well-maintained lanes and by-lanes. For many generations in Sultanpur, this locality was the primary home and hub of craftsmen and traders who operated out of the nearby fabric, bangle and pearl bazaars. Despite the definite lack of affluence in their everyday lives, the residents prided themselves on being 'experts', professionals and a rooted community which made them distinct from rural migrants in other urban ghettos; the latter were compelled to join the informal labour economy as unskilled workers, since knowledge of farming techniques had little value in an urban setting. Some parts of Sultanpur were notorious for harbouring a range of illegal industries such as arms dealing, the flesh trade and profiteering. 'We have day jobs and they have night jobs', said Mahmud, a bazaar trader, while pointing to prostitutes and dope dealers squatting under the pillars of the magnificent Charminar at night. Thus, both legal and illegal trade co-existed and was even co-dependent; several gangsters were celebrated as generous money-lenders and charitable donors (*zakah*) to the two prominent local mosques. The police, tax authorities and corporation members were bribed well

⁶ J. Hart, 'Children and Nationalism in a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Jordan', in *Childhood*, Vol.9, no.1, (2002), pp.35–47; Peter E. Hopkins, 'Youthful Muslim Masculinities: Gender and Generational Relations', in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol.31, no.3 (2006), pp.337–52; and Mai Ghoussoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb (eds), *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2006).

⁷ The names of people and places have been changed to protect their anonymity

⁸ The Charminar, the exquisite mosque of the four minarets, was built by Sultan Quli Qutb Shah to commemorate the end of a plague epidemic in Hyderabad in 1591. It is one of the primary tourist attractions in the city.

by gangsters and traders alike; thus most members of the state machinery did little to interfere with the moral and fiscal economy of Sultanpur.

According to several scholars, communal polarisations in electoral politics, especially between the 'radical' Muslim leadership represented by the Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (MIM), and Hindu nationalist groups such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the nature of rumour-mongering and electioneering in the constituencies, transformed and hierarchised social and political practices in Hyderabad's housing colonies.⁹ Naidu's study of inflammatory communal relations and urban decay in the walled city of Hyderabad further suggests that the steady post-Partition influx of Hindu families into Muslim-dominated areas, celebrated historically and symbolically as seats of imperial Mughal power, made a significant impact on local inter-community relations.¹⁰ The residents of Sultanpur remained nostalgic about 'a past' in the slums where 'there was peace' and 'there were good connections with other communities'. Amongst all the dominant forms of social, political and economic masculinities in the slums (related to employment, family authority, religious practices, etc.), the men remembered, romanticised and related to *Nizami/ashrafi mardangi* (a polite, poetic, tolerant masculinity from the days of *Nizami* rule in Hyderabad). Despite being battered by years of poverty, this genteel yet distinguished form of masculinity had not lost its charm among the slum dwellers. Even though there were several cases of wife-beating, domestic abuse, unemployment-related alcoholism and property scuffles amongst the men, slum dwellers did not see 'everyday violence' as rhetorical manhood. '*Woh sab to ghar ka mamla hain* (all that is domestic business)', retorted Faez, a senior resident of Sultanpur, when I interrupted his speech on male identities in Sultanpur.

The rise of local communal politics signified the death of religious harmony.¹¹ Over four decades, Sultanpur saw robust, sporadic spurts of communal clashes with middle- and lower-class Hindus, who usually lived in residential neighbourhoods around the Charminar. Sultanpur-wallahs described how

⁹ Asghar Ali Engineer, 'Hyderabad Riots: An Analytical Report', in Asghar Ali Engineer (ed.), *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India* (Delhi: Sangam Books, 1991); Sudhir Kakar, 'Rumours and Religious Riots', in Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds), *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2005), pp.53–60.

¹⁰ Ratna Naidu, *Old Cities, New Predicaments: A Study of Hyderabad* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990).

¹¹ Scholars such as Ian Copland and Dick Kooiman have critiqued the romanticisation of the past as harmonious in the princely states. They state that Hyderabad had a long history of bloody riots leading up to mass protests by Hindus against the princely court in the late 1930s. See Ian Copland, "'Communalism' in Princely India: The Case of Hyderabad, 1930–1940", in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.22, no.4 (1988), pp.783–814; and D. Kooiman, *Communalism and Indian Princely States: Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad in the 1930s* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002).

these conflicts, at times sparked by narrower issues such as slum-dwellers siphoning water from Hindu-dominated housing estates, were speedily resolved by negotiations among community leaders. Over time, these quotidian clashes became more violent expressions of religious discontent, involving burning homes, looting shops, and physical attacks on people, eventually driving a deeper wedge into local Hindu–Muslim relations. According to Faez: ‘Sometimes there was no real problem. A few slum-dwellers would take a small procession through one of the neighbouring Hindu-dominated areas, some drunk Hindu men would throw alcohol on them, and it would end up in a big fight with several people lying injured on the streets. There is no respite’. Sultanpur saw bouts of rioting in 1992 (when Hindu nationalists successfully tore down the controversial mosque in Ayodhya), and again in 2003 (when local Hindus tried to restrict Muslim residents from publicly marking the tenth anniversary of the destruction of the mosque). In 2007, a pipe-bomb blast near the Mecca Masjid and serial blasts near the Charminar killed several residents of Sultanpur, including children, and the ensuing blame game between the BJP and MIM members brought the communal tensions in the area into the media limelight. In March 2010, a dispute over the placing of religious flags in public places led to large-scale rioting in the old and new parts of the city. According to media sources there were several dead, over a hundred people critically injured, and almost two hundred people arrested for rioting and destroying property; twenty police stations clamped curfews on their areas and paramilitary forces were deployed to control the rioting in some parts of Hyderabad. While I was in the field, the men in Sultanpur bemoaned their powerlessness in the face of continuing discrimination and atrocities against poor Muslims; the latter had apparently ruined the space for genteel forms of male identities to prosper.¹²

The local residents and various NGO workers active in the area suggested to me that ‘child soldiering’ (*fauji bacche/sepahi bacche* as the children chose to call themselves) was a consequence of escalating communal antagonisms. Unlike Bombay, where I saw the small birth and rapid development of child aggression in the year and a half that I spent in a Hindu-dominated slum there,¹³ when in Hyderabad I was directed by local NGOs to Sultanpur where

¹² A more detailed history of communal violence in the Charminar constituency, the rise, fall and revival of the Majlis, the continuing debates around the Majlis storm troopers (the Razakars), and the post-annexation religious and linguistic politics in Hyderabad are discussed in my forthcoming publication “‘Exist, Endure, Erase the City (*Sheher mein jiye, is ko sahe, ya ise mitaye*)’”: Child Vigilantes and Micro-Cultures of Urban Violence in a Riot-Affected Hyderabad Slum’, in a special issue of the journal *Ethnography*.

¹³ Areyee Sen, *Shiv Sena Women: Violence and Communalism in a Bombay Slum* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2007).

child hostilities had intensified as a ‘problem’. Hence, for me, urban spaces in India were rendered comparable through the trope of male child violence.

When I arrived in Sultanpur on a sultry afternoon (uncomfortable in my Hindu identity), I was surprised to be warmly welcomed within the community. I discovered that the local slum-dwellers were eager to gain deeper insight into the troubled rationale of child vigilantism. Despite their encounters with unpredictability and violence, Sultanpur-wallahs felt ‘children used to be children’ (*bacche to bacche the*). Within what appeared to be the dominant cultural understanding of an ideal male childhood in the slum, boys spent time with their mates, balanced their lives between work and studies, maintained a certain standard of hygiene and religiosity, and most importantly respected their elders (*baro ki izzat karna*). Further, the boys were admiring and afraid of their fathers, affectionate towards their mothers, playful with their older and younger siblings. ‘Who were the worst child offenders? The boys who smoked a *bidi* and we could pull their ears if we caught them,’ said Aiyaz, one of the first slum-dwellers I met in Sultanpur. This reminiscence of an idyllic, gentle childhood lost to communal violence remained the official parental discourse in the slums.

While conducting research in Sultanpur, I attempted to design a local, more intimate history of child soldiering through the voices of the children themselves. While chatting with the boys about forming child squads, I discovered that their initial ‘decisions’ were usually related to being faced with their own mortality (*maut ke mooh dekhne ke baad*, after seeing the face of death). While some of these choices centred around direct experiences of riots (mobs targeting male children, children taking part in the funerals of their friends and families, ‘touching fresh graves and imagining what it felt like to lie under it’), most of the children also suffered from forms of displacement (children being sent back to the villages for safe-keeping, being taken out of school, having their mobility restricted, etc.). This constant state of fear and flux, especially while negotiating communally-tense public places, also made the boys acutely aware of the diminishing numbers of male children in the slums. According to Faisal, ‘If we were to at all become men in the future, we could not remain weak boys at present’. The children decided to ‘take matters into their own hands’, and a few of them initiated a system of night and day patrolling in the slums. The boys felt safer in groups, showing plenty of internal *bonhomie* and using persuasive tactics of recruitment on other children, strategies which eventually attracted more child ‘troops’ into everyday vigilantism. Even though local families disapproved of child armies inhabiting street corners and blackening the friendly, interactive character of public places, very few inhabitants of Sultanpur candidly questioned the children’s contribution towards enhancing safety in the neighbourhood.

Even community leaders were unwilling to take on the wrath of ‘angry, unpredictable *fauji bacche*’. I suggest that this ambivalence towards the child armies by parents, NGO workers and the police claiming ‘helplessness’, gave free rein to the boys to develop their own masculinist discourses around child violence.

Street Vigilantism and Child-Men in Public Places

Childhoods in Sultanpur could not be construed as a ‘gender neutral’ experience at all; there were clear demarcations between the roles of boys and girls within families and in the neighbourhood. The girls usually had limited mobility, took on more domestic responsibilities than their male siblings, and were often discouraged from attending school. Some of the boys in my study attended local educational institutions around the Sultanpur slums. These formal and informal schools were usually run by faith-based organisations, various NGO schemes, philanthropists, and city corporations; there were no networks of *madrasas* active in this area. Both male and female children helped their real or adoptive parents and relatives in their work, especially in their spare time. The boys from families with small businesses in handicrafts were encouraged to learn the trade. Almost all the boys were involved in petty criminal activities, like pick-pocketing, ferrying illegal goods and selling drugs, for fast cash. These kinds of ‘soft crimes’ were overlooked by parents, siblings, gangsters and the local state authorities, and were normalised within Sultanpur’s semi-legal and illegal economy (‘boys will be boys’). A significant number of boys did day or night shifts as labourers, seeking out employment in the informal labour market for an additional income. All this was, however, their individual lives and enterprises. Similar to the child vigilantes in Bombay, the boys’ armies in Sultanpur claimed that their group endeavours had little to do with burglary, drug dealing, or supporting family incomes and businesses. Over the period of my research in Sultanpur, the children offered several reasons for preferring an exalted status as vigilantes. Some boys felt that there could be a police backlash if children became ‘marked’ as gangsters involved in tough, illegal transactions; others felt too small and weak to compete with the gangs which were well-established in the area. But all the boys persistently justified collective child violence as a means of overcoming the existential vulnerabilities of unsteady childhoods. I prefer to use words like ‘soldiers’ (*sepahi*) instead of gangs and squads, and ‘war’ (*ladai/yudh*) instead of vigilantism, primarily because the children themselves used these categories to position themselves in a masculine ‘war-scape’. In casual conversations, the children added that upholding identities through ‘army-ing’ demarcated them from other ‘unsoldierly’ children (which I discuss later in this paper).

During my stay in the slum, I documented the activities of approximately fifteen local child armies with memberships of ten to twelve children. The members of a particular army usually lived on the same lane. However, the boundaries of these groups were flexible, as boys often moved between the squads depending on new friendships, or love of common sporting activities ranging from cricket to football to flying kites. Even though most children were suspicious of Hindus, they befriended me, which in turn annoyed some members of the community who had been denied access to the inner world of the *fauji bacche*. I realised (in brief) that my status as an outsider (as against a familiar Hindu 'trouble-maker'), a woman researcher (with no agenda of offering moral, authoritative sermons) and a peculiar adult (who was deeply passionate about football), helped the children temporarily set aside their negative stereotyping of Hindus.

Each child squad in Sultanpur took on the task of 'guarding all things precious in their territory'. As part of their everyday activities, the child gangs concentrated on protecting the streets, abusing or throwing stones at 'suspicious' Hindu neighbours, watching over and patrolling around local mosques, chasing away people of other faiths who were visiting local *dargahs* and *imamwadas*, making threatening gestures in crowded areas, swiftly drawing out their crude weapons to scare away unknown passers-by, and so on. 'These are the same streets where we were abused as *basti ke gande bacche* (dirty kids from the slum), now people step aside to let us pass', said Alam. The availability of new technologies of violence allowed children's gangs in Sultanpur to gain easy access to and carry lightweight ammunition, in addition to sticks and swords. According to Alam, 'Smaller children felt relieved to be able to shoot from a distance without having to physically overpower larger opponents. This makes them feel less vulnerable'. Even though I did not see any children discharge their weapons directly at people, I was still curious to know how some of the boys equipped themselves with expensive guns despite not having a steady income. After several weeks of prodding and probing, the children took me on a 'get-a-gun' tour. Several children worked in shops and factories and saved part of their income to buy a gun from a local dealer; some children worked in illegal weapons warehouses and were rewarded with a gun; some boys made drug drops and were given a gun for self-protection. Traders also acquired illegal guns to protect their inflammable goods, shops, homes, and women during riots. Many residents of Sultanpur justified the acquisition of guns on the grounds that there was a clear distinction between the work ethic of an armed gangster, and the everyday practicality of a fearful poor Muslim who kept a gun under his pillow. These guns were openly snatched by the local children. But when Abdullah pointed to the local police station as the source of

his guns, I was aghast. He said: 'I mop floors at the station and simply steal the guns from unlocked weapons vaults. No one ever cares or counts'.

Although the children preferred to openly tour the streets, they also built small hide-outs in the slums, primarily to store their weapons. Partially sheltered from public view, these hide-outs would simultaneously act as an arms workshop and a gathering place for the local boys. Whilst hammering carved wooden handles onto large kitchen knives (to make crude swords), the boys would share food, cigarettes and conversation. Some children would remain silent. Many months into my stay in Sultanpur, the children admitted that these moments of quietude were meaningful exchanges among them, which were more effective in establishing an intimate bond between the male children than loud and long speeches on the importance of child patrolling. The intense looks in their eyes, gentle smiles of admiration, and slapping of shoulders articulated a certain comfort in comradeship. A few boys would simply enjoy a nap and escape the afternoon sun. Most of the children toyed with knives and guns. They showed off new arms, discussed the value of user-friendly weapons, and complained about a shortage in the supply of bullets. Squatting for hours, the boys would try and stitch additional pockets onto their shirts and trousers, mainly to carry small arms.

Intra-Community Policing and the Public Beating of Women

Some of the testimonies of the child soldiers in the Hyderabad slums differed substantially from those of the boys' squads I studied in Bombay. While the latter also remained concerned about maintaining the sanctity of boundaries between Hindu and Muslim residential areas,¹⁴ the children's squads in Sultanpur tried to simultaneously control the internal dynamics of slum life. The boys created principles of 'good conduct', which was clearly extended to encompass the adult world.

Most of the boys felt that the loss of masculine pride within the community had been brought about by the loose morals of local women. Abdul Rahman, 11 years old, said: 'It's not just during the riots that men from other communities come into in our slums; outsiders come and go as they please, and at all times. The local women open their doors to them, invite them inside, you know what I mean. If you dig holes into the walls of your own house, bad winds will blow in, isn't it? Since the men are failing, it has become our task to keep out the storms'. The child squads set up surveillance teams which regularly exchanged

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

information on such 'deviant' community members. Street corners and playing grounds became informal courts where the children took collective decisions on the form of retributive justice. The boys harassed women to try to make them wear veils (not as a religious dictate, but because women were softer targets for the children). At times they brutalised their own mothers for disobeying the directives of the child gangs. Mumtaz, a widow like Salima, was dragged out of her house and beaten by a group of child soldiers, including her 10-year-old son, for allegedly 'flirting' with a Hindu salesman. Displaying her bruises to me, she said, almost sympathetically: 'The children don't want to be victims anymore, and they have started to victimise their own people to manage their hurt (*dard sambhalna*)'. When I asked the children involved about the significance of this act, they eventually admitted that they had chosen Mumtaz strategically because she did not live with male family members who would rescue her, and because she did not receive much support from the community because of her 'bad reputation as a flirtatious widow'. The children carried out the beating in the afternoon, when all the strong male slum-dwellers were either away at work or taking a nap. So the children were aware (and afraid) of the fact that their actions might provoke adult resistance, and their army could be publicly vanquished by a group of outraged men. Even though the children went after a frail target, they chose a public beating over an attack at home because their primary aim was to exhibit their *capacity* for direct violence, which they did successfully. 'We did not use any arms on Mumtaz, because our intention was not to kill her but to send out a warning to the community', concluded Abdul Rahman. Mumtaz's elder brother, Saud, said: 'Under any other circumstances, I would have broken my nephew's leg for daring to touch my sister. But the people in Sultanpur were keen to forget the incident and move on. I am scared of the repercussions of my retaliation, because the children have started to control the streets'.

The boys' intra-community vigilante activities also involved trashing Muslim shops where the owner had established business links with other communities; the theatricality of armed children parading on the streets affected trade relations between Hindus and Muslims. Muslim traders, who would normally shoo away children loitering around the market, felt compelled to treat these local boys as distinguished guests. Most shop owners selling fragile or combustible goods became secretive about their transactions to avoid blatantly challenging the child armies. Sadid, a bangle-seller, said:

I keep offering tea and biscuits to the child patrols. Many Hindu women come to my shop, I have to be charming to them, often touch their wrists to help them put on bangles. I am terrified. Every

item I sell is made of glass, and if the children smash my shop, I will not be able to repair the damage. So I am trying to avoid having Hindu customers in my shop, even at a loss.

During the years of communal tension, Muslim children had lost family members, witnessed women being raped, and some of the children had been maimed. Even though they had endured a status as victims in riot situations, the child armies in Sultanpur were eager to re-invent themselves as empowered masculine aggressors, and they refused to risk their animated public lives for peace or profit in the adult male world.

According to the boys of Sultanpur, child violence was a performance of masculinity directed towards reclaiming male pride within a community defeated by, and defenceless against, continuing poverty and communal violence. Yet the ethnography mapped in the preceding sections also suggests that child masculinities in Sultanpur were fragile and fragmented. The boys, for example, were deeply aware of the limits of their physical strength, a typical indicator of assertive masculinities. Hence, child aggression was not focused on developing strong, individual and bounded manhoods, but sought to unite many weak emotional and physical frames to create a critical mass of embittered children. The boys started out with the strategic beating of women, as violence against deviant women was covertly normalised in the patriarchal structures of slum life. This form of clustered child masculinities, however, created a new culture of urban violence in the slums, and allowed poor Muslim children to uncover subversive yet effective paths of navigating terrains of terror. According to Korbin's study of child bullying and schoolyard shootings in Cleveland, Ohio, troubled parents of violent children were not only intimidated by their own offspring, they were also reticent in reproaching other school bullies; several guardians felt afraid that the parents of aggressive children would eventually stand up for their sons and turn against the admonishers.¹⁵ In Sultanpur, the suspicion and silence that the child squads generated amongst the parents pre-empted a combined response from the families against nascent child masculinities. What demarcated the children of Sultanpur from most other ethnographies on urban child violence was that the boys did not indulge in child-to-child violence, even at school; their quest was to *protect* a male childhood, and display their disillusionment with the adult world, *both* Hindu and Muslim. The violent activities of the child squads disrupted dominant cultural constructions of childhood; and significantly, they

¹⁵ Jill E. Korbin, 'Children, Childhoods and Violence', in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol.32 (2003), pp.431–46.

contested cultural meanings of parenthood and family life in the slums, which I will elaborate upon in the following sections.

Emasculating Men, Rejecting Women: Child Machismo at Home

Within the domestic sphere, the dread of violent, chastising children made parents uneasy. Abu Karim, a slum-dweller, said: 'I am too scared of punishing my son at home. What if I go out and his friends punish me in return?' Several weeks into my study in Sultanpur, he confessed to feeling emasculated by his 12-year-old son (*bara saal ke ladke ke saamne mein mard na raha*), and was becoming increasingly lenient about him not going to work, using abusive language or skipping school. He denied that his ineffectuality was linked to the loss of pride and property during riots, even though his son ridiculed him as a useless coward within the community. He claimed that his humiliation at home was far greater than 'running away during outbreaks of violence'. Many men like Abu Karim suffered from a sense of 'roleless-ness' within the family because they could barely contribute to their boys' education in manhood, reproduce traditional models of masculinity, or inculcate in small children a respect for male elders within the community. In a reversal of roles, the disciplining male children, who had little time for inept fathers, demanded reverence from traditional figures of male authority. Besides their fathers, uncles and grandfathers, the child vigilantes also had an impact on those young men in the family who were trying to find their own masculine status, and who felt 'out-maled' by the child soldiers. The latter not only usurped the attention usually bestowed upon young men in the slums, but were confusing these youths about their honour and standing within the locality. According to Aslam, a 20-year-old who is keen to get married and start a small business in handicrafts, 'This is the time that *I* should be the hero in the street, not my younger brother. If I walk past him with a girl, I want to be able to dominate him, slap him around, throw a *chappal* (sandal) at him, show off, and not the other way around. My wife will think I am castrated (*namard*) if my small brother beats my wife, my mother, and I am too scared to stop him'.

Male child brutality also had a bearing on women's roles in the slums. In addition to surviving assaults by their menfolk, by predators on the streets, by Hindu rioters and by their own male children, the women had to cope with what they often termed as 'an end to joyous motherhood'. 'I thought it was auspicious to be the mother of a son', lamented Amina, coming out of her home to talk to me. Aggressive child masculinities prevented slum women from 'healing' themselves (and others trapped in this panorama of violence and poverty) by playing out compassionate/maternal roles. The women felt they

had lost their sense of agency and social worth when denied positions as peace-makers, especially during post-conflict phases. An integral part of the latter process involved caring for weak, defenceless children. 'I feel I have failed because I have no control over my son. The local boys don't need their mothers anymore' Amina concluded, before quickly retreating into her shanty when a child squad passed by. However some women did recover their agency in an attempt to break the cycle of male child violence in the slums. Instead of fostering and strengthening family ties, they shattered fraternal relationships in order to protect pre-verbal male children from the influence of violent older brothers. After several months of weeping and negotiating with Amir, her unrelenting elder son, Amina eventually left the slum in the middle of the night with Amir's one-year-old brother and moved in with a cousin in a distant locality. When I met Amir, an esteemed member of the vigilante squad in his neighbourhood who was now living with his father, he told me: 'Let her come back, *maad padeki* (she will get a beating)'. I went to visit Amina before I finished my fieldwork and found her cradling her son and singing a song from Deepa Mehta's controversial film on Partition, 1947: *Earth*. The song says: '*Ishwar Allah tere jahan mein, nafrat kyo hain, jung hain kyun. Tera dil to itna bara hain, insaan ka dil tang hain kyun?* (Ishwar Allah, in your world why is there conflict and hatred; if your heart is so large then why is the human heart angry?)'.

Most children had little sympathy for women like Amina. According to some members of the child squads, communal riots did not cause a sudden rupture in parent-sibling-child bonding. Marginalised lives of poverty, experiences of child neglect, and festering anger towards their parents' incapacity to offer emotional support and food security had already strained familial relations. Ali, an 11-year-old, said: 'I don't know what happy childhood people talk about. It's a myth in their heads. My dad was a drunk, he beat everyone around him, we never had enough to eat. What's happy about that?' The conditions of conflict highlighted the failure of the community not only to save its male pride (*mohalla mardangi*), but also to protect children from injury and death. Exposure to these forms of physical, material and moral abandonment encouraged local children to label defenceless women and defeated men as the 'enemy within'. The activities of the slum children, nevertheless, created a public debate in the slums about the loss of adult authority, and the children's capacity to dismantle long-established notions of everyday respect and cultural reverence.

The boy squads were variously positioned in relation to more hegemonic notions of masculinity, which were embedded in violent traditional/religious

ideologies. For example, some of the child discourses around masculinity were not explicitly braided together with male sexual practices. Smaller children in the squads did not display an overt interest in capturing women through seduction or force. Girl children were not yet direct objects of desire, and 9-year-old Arif claimed that 'this was not about girls'. Some of the older boys also emphasised that their violent masculinities were not determined by their pubescent sexual desires, and exhibiting an aggressive manhood was not oriented towards wooing local women. Unlike the boys in the slums of Bombay, who indulged in body-building to imitate well-muscled movie stars, sexual media images were not integrated into discourses around child vigilantism in Hyderabad. Even though most scholars argue that sexuality was an important site for restoring masculinities in South Asia,¹⁶ the vigilantes kept sexual practices and the consumption of sexual media images (as yet) detached from child violence; reconfiguring masculine identities remained more closely tied to solidifying group identities on the ground. Further, studies on rising gang behaviour emphasise the importance of territorialisation in gang activities, which in turn is related to masculine self-identifications among gang members.¹⁷ The strong absence of territoriality in child gang activities, their abstinence from criminal activities, the dearth of sadistic gang initiation rites, and the flexibility of gangs' pecking orders, hierarchies and leadership roles, separated the child gang phenomenon in Sultanpur from everyday gang masculinities, not just locally, but also at a global level.

Scholars exploring routines and rituals among Muslim youth in the expanding ribbon of working-class neighbourhoods across the world suggest a strong link between masculine performances and everyday nationalism.¹⁸ Amongst them, Hart's study of adolescent Muslim masculinities in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan highlights how controlling women and engagements with debates around Islam marked the transition to social adulthood in marginalised socio-political spaces.¹⁹ In Sultanpur, however, the children's aggression towards

¹⁶ S. Srivastava, *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities, and Culture in South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004); Thomas Hansen, 'Recuperating Masculinity: Hindu Nationalism, Violence and the Exorcism of the Muslim "Other"', in *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol.16, no.2 (1996), pp.137–72; and Joseph S. Alter, 'Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India', in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.53, no.1 (1994), pp.45–66.

¹⁷ C. Alexander, *The Asian Gang: Ethnicity, Identity, Masculinity* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2000); S.A. Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Crosses the Line* (London: Penguin, 2009); Philippe Bourgois, 'In Search Of Masculinity: Violence, Respect and Sexuality among Puerto Rican Crack Dealers in East Harlem', in *The British Journal of Criminology*, No.36 (1996), pp.412–27.

¹⁸ J. Hart, 'Dislocated Masculinity: Adolescence and the Palestinian Nation-in-Exile', in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.21, no.1 (2008), pp.64–81; and Kabita Chakraborty, 'Unmarried Muslim Youth and Sex Education in the Bustees of Kolkata', in *South Asian History and Culture*, Vol.1, no.2 (2010), pp.268–81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

unveiled women or Hindu traders accused of predatory behaviour often *appeared* (to local NGO workers, some slum dwellers, heads of mosques) as an attempt to revive an idealised Islamic past, as though to turn an unsatisfactory present into a fictive Islamic paradise. Beneath the surface, the children had an unguided engagement with everyday issues around Islam, gender or religious practices in the slums, and an uninformed understanding of media images around the 'war on terror'. They were fairly inattentive and restless during discussions about these subjects at the mosques, or during meetings among community leaders. The activities of the child squads were oriented more towards reminding the inhabitants of Sultanpur, local Hindus and Muslims, of the power and presence of male children, rather than displaying genuine concern about the purity of Islam. When the boys met on the street corners, they discussed violence: how to co-ordinate plans of attack and defence during outbreaks of rioting; how to avoid arguing over the distribution of duties; how to popularise 'warriorhood' among children; and so on. Yet time and again, the children expressed their frustration that politicians and *mollahs* (members of the Islamic clergy) thrust violent religious identities on them, especially as young *jehadis*. Significantly, none of my child informants used the term for religious war (*jihad*) to represent their aggression against other communities, nor did they use *shaheed* or *shahada* (martyr or martyrdom) to rationalise their commitment to everyday vigilantism. So the boys (at least for the present) overtly rejected grand nationalist ideologies in favour of child masculine identities, the latter being created and collated among the slum children through peer group debates, decisions and deeds.

Community Support for Child Squads: Receiving 'Mixed Signals'

In Sultanpur, the panic about child soldiering was not unanimous. For most youth gangs, the police and members of correction facilities were important enemies, and dominant religious orders were a pernicious source of doctrine and dogma on uncontrolled children. In her research on childhoods in poverty, Scheper-Hughes documented the atrocities carried out by the state and by religious organisations against poor children in many countries, including social indifference to the routinisation of child death on the streets.²⁰ By contrast in Hyderabad, the local-level state machinery had discriminatory policies *in favour* of child gangs. The officer-in-charge of the Sultanpur police

²⁰ N. Scheper-Hughes (ed.), *Child Survival: Anthropological Perspectives on the Treatment and Maltreatment of Children* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1987); N. Scheper-Hughes, 'Infant Mortality and Infant Care: Cultural and Economic Constraints on Nurturing in Northeast Brazil', in *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol.19, no.5 (1984), pp.535–46; N. Scheper-Hughes and C.F. Sargent (eds), *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

station dismissed my concerns about the child squads. 'They are protecting their own community, nothing else', he said gruffly. So the local police stations rarely treated child soldiers as delinquents, and ignored the complaints of violated women and disgruntled shop-keepers. Even though the children responded with apathy towards various religious labels, mosques in the locality did not forbid the practice of child soldiering; instead religious spokespersons justified child aggression as a way of countering Hindu supremacy. While other youth gangs were often arrested, imprisoned or chastised, lenient police practices and supportive religious sermons allowed boy soldiers to perceive their conduct as part of a greater cause. Anxious families in Sultanpur were dissuaded from seeking help from the police or the mosques, since these institutions were apathetic towards the suppression of child militancy.

There were also several slum-dwellers who had an ambivalent stance towards child soldiering. I met families who were *proud* of their children having a prominent public role in a locality that faced occasional threats from 'outsiders'; some parents argued that the presence of child patrols made the streets safer. Older women were pleased that young girls were wearing veils around the slum area because of their fear of the children. The local gun dealers, who handed over arms to children as rewards, inadvertently guided the nature of local child violence. The act of receiving guns from powerful members of the community, the rare masculine heroes in Sultanpur, could have been interpreted as patronage by the child soldiers. Though the children were quick to deny it, even my own friendship with the children may have been construed by them as an expression of adult support. The children were thus isolated from the adult world, but only to an extent. There was space for social acceptability which reinforced, rather than distorted, violent male identities. These sets of contradictions around violence, masculinity, religion and the community seemed to further obscure the children's moral assessment of their actions. Most of the adults, however, denied offering direct ideological or practical guidance to the children on soldiering, and insisted that the local boys took to violent activities of their own accord.

There were plenty of small children in Sultanpur who did not take part in vigilantism. However, their body language and friendly gestures were a display of solidarity with the child soldiers. The quieter boys played football and carom with the child militants, or just idled away their time in the weapons hide-outs. Some of the children eventually succumbed through the tactics of persuasion to recruitment, while others volunteered for softer tasks such as ferrying weapons and messages. However, they were well aware that direct violence gained more attention and status. Shakeel, a 12-year-old and a 'respected' soldier, told me

that the children who did not fight could be easily identified from hesitations in their speech and movements. 'Those boys try to skulk past us, have their eyes cast down, give us furtive smiles, look embarrassed', he said, he said. The fact that these 'passive' children felt less worthy than the violent boys, and offered the latter envious admiration, also propped up the superior masculine status of Sultanpur's child vigilantes. Several non-violent children explained to me that their failure to inflict violence in real life was as humiliating as being subjected to violence during the riots. They asserted that their inhibitions were not a reflection of a lifelong avoidance of soldiering. The non-vigilante children had not yet actualised plans to 'combat', but most of them claimed that they would eventually compensate for their shortcomings by being aggressively violent young men in the future. Even though the child squads directed their resentment against what they understood to be a dysfunctional adult world, child militancy also created subordinate masculinities, status anxieties and social rifts amongst poor children. Paradoxically, this was the same male child world that the boy squads seemed desperate to unify and protect.

Some Concluding Comments: Child of Many Worlds

Sultanpur was fertile ground for explorations of masculine discursivities. A respectable number of studies on men and masculinity in South Asia emphasise the fluidities of masculine identities, and the ways in which they traverse the domains of migration, financial success, caste, class, sexuality, nationalisms, power and the body.²¹ Yet theory often lags behind swiftly-changing community discourses on male-ness, especially on the increasingly-rapid journey from boyhood to manhood in transient, unstable urban spaces in the region. In this concluding section, I want to reflect on some aspects of the ethnography discussed above which makes a potential contribution to research on maleness, especially in India, and makes visible scholarship on 'not-fully-articulated' masculinities.

²¹ F. Osella and C. Osella, 'Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala', in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.6, no.1 (2000), pp.117–33; Radhika Chopra, 'Invisible Men: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Male Domestic Labor', in *Men and Masculinities*, Vol.9, no.2 (2006), pp.152–67; G. De Neve, 'The Workplace and the Neighbourhood: Locating Masculinities in the South Indian Textile Industry', in F. Osella, C. Osella and R. Chopra (eds), *South Asian Masculinities* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004), pp.60–95; Kajri Jain, 'Muscularity and its Ramifications: Mimetic Male Bodies in Indian Mass Culture', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol.24, special issue (2001), pp.197–224; Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism and Nationalism in India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Joseph S. Alter, 'Celibacy, Sexuality, and Nationalism in North India', in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (eds), *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp.310–20.

My fieldwork suggests that the absence of strict masculine codes for small children gave flexibility to poor boys to approach and stage their manhood in myriad unbounded ways. Since small children were less constrained by cultural regulations, especially in heavily gender-coded zones such as urban slums, they could choose to adopt, loosely or closely, a range of male identity constructs they encountered within the existential realities of ghetto life. Violence and the performance of aggressive masculinity was the domain of men, whether it was exhibited as disciplining fathers, wife-beaters or rioters. Despite these displays of youth/adult masculinities, the child squads of Sultanpur felt that the Muslim men had been stripped of their masculine identities due to a range of factors including the latter's failure to withstand poverty and conflict. Organised violence, a phenomenon integrated into the slum-scape through gangster activities and communal clashes, became an important survivalist strategy for poor children. In addition, for the boys, entering the labour market, taking part in illegal transactions, learning their family trade, etc. had already blurred the boundaries between a responsible manhood and a romantic, reductionist understanding of childhood. The absence of a united, restrictive reaction from the community opened up greater opportunities for the boys to create, emulate and sustain collective masculinities. The creation of multiple masculine selves amongst the boys (as soldiers, patrollers, labourers, leaders, deliverers of social justice, etc.) not only re-coded child victimologies in the urban slums, but partially re-mapped community discourses around masculinity.

My ethnography also suggests that the phenomenon of child men in the slums created a new set of social relations among the boys, which allowed them to give prominence to poor children's fears and grievances. The practice of child vigilantism prevented diplomatic negotiations between Muslim slum-dwellers and their Hindu neighbours; seeing the small body of a child carrying arms reminded NGO workers that they had achieved little in helping riot-affected children cope with their fears; the activities of violent children resisted conventional knowledge about childhood and child vulnerability within the community; and the exhibition of anger challenged superficial narratives of peace and amity in post-conflict situations. The image of the unforgiving child not only resisted public amnesia about past experiences of violence and victimhood, but it contested an established cultural grammar of negotiating loss and bereavement. Grieving for the loss of friends, family members, and security through a display of violence was supposed to be contained to the adult male realm. Since most social suffering discourses were not centred on *child* revenge, male children's vigilantism in Sultanpur contested cultural and policy stereotypes about child innocence as an indicator of peace and normalcy within poor communities. Thus the child vigilantes of Sultanpur did not want

to become 'the forgotten children'.²² They tried to resist yet another experience of abandonment, voiceless-ness, and marginalisation.

Several scholars exploring martial/virile masculinities in South Asia, usually related to nationalist movements, have shown how communities view emerging religio-political youth identities as the recasting of weary, traditional masculinities in progressive, socially-integrated moulds.²³ My ethnography interrogates the ways in which child vigilantism came to be understood as social alienation by large sections of the community in Sultanpur, as child masculinities challenged a seemingly-impossible desire for a pristine childhood in poverty. While disputes over the place of violent children within the community, the family, the urban slum and the peer group became increasingly evident during the course of researching this paper, the place of religious nationalism still remained fuzzy. Even though the children were conscious of their Muslim identity, of local-level minority politics, and of the growing fear of pan-Islamic loyalties, their clear rejection of the attachment of a religious tag to child vigilantism partially de-linked the relationship between religion and male violence. While Islam was an integral part of the self-definition of the community, and the children claimed their actions were a result of the loss of masculinity among local Muslim men (*musalmaan ki mardangi*), child masculinities were more evidently directed towards surviving everyday poverty than recovering a masculine Islam.

Were the child vigilantes re-inscribing the stranglehold of hegemonic masculinities within the wider system of social practices in the slums? Most scholars of masculine performativities argue that masculinities are compelled to function within social constraints to be intelligible and efficacious;²⁴ manhood has to be constantly demonstrated, shared, achieved and reclaimed in public and intimate spheres. Emasculating fathers, out-maling brothers, victimising women in the name of protecting them, displaying violence, becoming

²² 'The Forgotten Children of Congo' is a pioneering documentary on the plight of the street children of the Congo which generated a new terminology of marginalisation in international child studies.

²³ Thomas Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Deepak Mehta, 'Collective Violence, Public Spaces, and the Unmaking of Men', in *Men and Masculinities*, Vol.9, no.2 (2006), pp.204–25; Steve Derné, 'Men's Sexuality and Women's Subordination in Indian Nationalisms', in Tamar Mayer (ed.), *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.237–60; and Sikata Banerjee, 'Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India', in *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol.26, no.2 (2003), pp.167–79.

²⁴ Pradeep Jeganathan, 'A Space for Violence: Anthropology, Politics and the Location of a Sinhala Practice of Masculinity', in Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (eds), *Community, Gender and Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp.37–65; and Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'Body Language: The Semiotics of Nationalism in Tamil India', in *Gender & History*, Vol.10, no.1 (1998), pp.78–109.

independent of parents, and dissolving ‘the child’ within the family are, in fact, culturally-reproduced ways of sustaining fragile insecure masculinities. Thus the emerging child masculinities in Sultanpur (despite being subversive within the dominant discourses on childhood) could *not* be interpreted as radically transgressive. Even though the child vigilantes were endangering certain male power structures and destabilising customary masculinities and femininities, the practice of child vigilantism did not completely dislocate given/accepted meanings of traditional manhood.

I also suggest that the children of Sultanpur performed masculinities not just to survive a fragile male childhood, but also to *retain* some enjoyable aspects of it such as playing football, flying kites, or meeting friends without the constant fear of defeat or death. Ramil Anosa Andag’s report on humanitarian responses to child soldiering argues that for boys in conflict zones, battle-grounds became a mere extension of play areas, and children’s enactment of violence in both these spaces were symbolic of hyper-masculine childhoods.²⁵ In Sultanpur, except for some friendly wrestling, the boys did not introduce violence and war games into the playing field or the schoolyard. They felt that their performance of violence *outside* the playground was enough to make local residents realise that boys playing together was no longer a sign of innocence. ‘Just because we are playing together, instead of patrolling together, doesn’t mean we are small, circumcised children (*chote, katwa bacche*) again, like some people called us before’, said 12-year-old Jamal. I suggest that the children’s authoritarianism was not structured as a complete rebellion against the community, but was primarily a resistance against the experiences of *chote, katwa bacche* in a volatile social environment. The articulation and performance of child masculinities merely aimed to remind the community about its failures towards small children.

²⁵ Ramil Andag, Victor Buenaventura, Vanessa Retuerma, Dr. Nymia Simbulan and Dino Subingsubing, *Deadly Playgrounds: The Phenomenon of Child Soldiers in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Philippine Human Rights Information Center, 2005).