Journal of Kolkata Society for Asian Studies : Vol. 11. No. 2, Dec. 2025

Shared Spaces, Overlapping Cultures: Co-Spatiality, Syncretism, and the Cultural Universe of Zakaria Street

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Abstract

This article engages in a critical discussion of multiple facets of Zakaria Street, Kolkata, and its surrounding locality, ranging from the historical development of the street to the complex cultural and spatial identity that defines it. It traces the historical genesis of the street and the dialectical and dialogic relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim communities that defined the locality's syncretic culture, by underscoring a history of conflict and reconciliation. The article explores the intricate interactions between Hindu and Islamic cultural influences, emphasizing the concurrent arrangements of various religious, commercial, and cultural structures along the street. It also provides a critical examination of the renowned culinary culture of the area, discussing the interdependent relationship expressed through food between the Hindu and Muslim communities during Ramadan. In conclusion, the article underscores the recent efforts made to promote communal harmony in the highlighted street, amidst a politically charged environment marked by the rise of Hindu nationalism and increasing communal tensions.

Keywords: *Co-spatiality, Communal Harmony, Kolkata, Secularism, Space, Syncretism.*

Introduction

A thriving cosmopolitan culture is one of the defining features of Kolkata, the administrative capital of the Indian state of West Bengal. While the city's demography is largely accentuated by a Hindu-majority population, residents from other faiths, namely Islam, have co-existed with the Hindu community for centuries, sharing histories of strife, struggle, and camaraderie. Zakaria Street, a short but important street in Central Kolkata, and its surrounding locality are defined by the co-existence of the Hindu Marwaris and Muslim communities over the years and it houses the biggest Ramadan market of the city, which draws not only Muslim but Hindu enthusiasts in search of delectable food items. Despite having a troubled history of communal conflict, this street comes alive with transactions between the two communities and remains a vibrant example of a syncretic and secular culture. This article engages in a critical discussion of multiple facets of Zakaria Street and its surrounding locality, ranging from the historical development of the street to the complex cultural and spatial identities that

define it. The article traces the historical genesis of the street and the dialectical and dialogic relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim communities that defined the locality's syncretic culture, by underscoring a history of conflict and reconciliation. It further discusses the complex interactions between the Hindu and Islamic cultural layers by drawing attention to the co-spatial arrangements of different religious, commercial, and cultural structures and spaces along the street, using the idea of 'co-spatiality,' conceptualized by Jacques Lévy (2021). It also makes a critical survey of the celebrated culinary culture of this locality, discussing the transactional relationship celebrated through food between the historically contending Hindu and Muslim communities during the Ramadan months. The article concludes by highlighting the recent initiatives undertaken to foster communal harmony with the street in focus, against an incendiary atmosphere surcharged with the rampant spread of Hindu nationalism and communal tension.

Situating the Geographical Coordinates

Zakaria Street is located in the Chitpur region of Central Kolkata, in Ward Number 43, under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation's (KMC) jurisdiction. This historic street connects two important avenues of the city: Rabindra Sarani and Chittaranjan (also known as Central) Avenue. Known for being an important site for its religious and gastronomic features, it hosts the historic Nakhoda Mosque, the largest mosque in West Bengal as well as in Eastern India, and the street turns into an open-air exhibition of various food items during the Ramadan months every year, attracting thousands of epicureans from across the length and breadth of Kolkata, and also from outside. The settlement of 'Haji' Nur Muhammad Zakaria, an influential Muslim businessman and philanthropist hailing from the Kutchi Memon community in the 1850s, possibly led to the christening of this place, which is still resided by a large section of Kolkata's Muslim community (Bandopadhyay, 2022: 73). Along with places like Park Circus and Kidderpore, Zakaria Street and its fringes serve as a significant sanctuary for the Muslim populace of the city, which seems to revolve by and large around the Nakhoda Mosque and dates back to the colonial period.

It is interesting to note how Zakaria Street, named after a Muslim businessman, like a hyphen connects two important roads running parallel to each other and named after two illustrious Indians with non-Muslim [Brahmo and Hindu] affiliations, namely, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the celebrated litterateur and polymath and the winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature, and Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925), popularly known as Deshbandhu, the monumental political activist and lawyer from Bengal. The recent outburst of Hindu nationalism in India triggered the rechristening of many Islamic-sounding places to more 'palatable' and 'decolonized' Hindu ones. It is to be noted that the chequered positioning of different streets and landmarks in this part of Kolkata, that have been named after personalities hailing from both Hindu and Muslim communities. Located precisely

at the junction where Zakaria Street merges with Chittaranjan Avenue, is the Mohammad Ali Park, named after Mohammad Ali Jauhar (1878-1931), an Indian freedom activist and a principle founder of the All India Muslim League. It has emerged as one of the most celebrated centres for Durga Puja, the annual Hindu festival observing the homecoming of the Goddess Durga. As many as eight to nine alleys or streets radiate out of Zakaria Street, which are alternatively named after Hindu and Muslim personalities or religious sites. A glance at the names might provide an idea of a peculiar symbolic syncretism operating in this area; namely, Syed Salley Street, Surti Bagan Street, Sudam Sil Street, Mandir Street, Kanai Seal Street, Nawab Badruddin Street, Ismail Madan Street, and Rajmohan Street. In the absence of any demarcation line between these streets, a peculiar fluidity is observed between them as one street 'flows' into the other. The name of the major arterial street, i.e., Zakaria Street, often surmounts that of the subsidiary ones. As a result, substantial portions of the connecting streets are frequently identified as parts of Zakaria Street. The individual identities of the connecting streets and lanes are subsumed under the larger symbolic and cultural paradigm of Zakaria Street, suggesting uncertainty and turbulent confusion, since the "boundaries between organizations [here, streets] are blurred and the importance of interdependence increases" (Jorani and Hassan, 2017: 1133). This arrangement of streets bearing multicultural signifiers not only testifies to the presence of a vibrant syncretic culture in this locality but also points to the possibilities of overcoming religious and cultural animosities existing between the Hindu and the Muslim communities. This will be highlighted in the following sections. Zakaria Street observes parallel operations of the spiritual, mercantile, and the culinary dimensions since it houses a complex mirror work of mosques and temples, hotels and shops, and eateries and restaurants. These three dimensions intersect and operate parallelly in a single space. The street is lined by colonial-era residential houses and shops, and is marked by a crowded and insalubrious atmosphere, where the urban modernity of Kolkata still negotiates with the airs of a distant colonial time.

The Historical Development of Zakaria Street

As mentioned earlier, Zakaria Street was named after 'Haji' Nur Muhammad Zakaria, an influential Muslim businessman and philanthropist hailing from the Kutchi Memon community, which traces its origin to the Kutch region of Gujarat. Possibly a resident of the nearby Amratolla Street, Haji Zakaria was a trader from the aforementioned region, who arrived in the city after the Great Revolt of 1857. By the 1870s, he started playing an important role in Bengal's politics and emerged as a Pan-Islamist, and subsequently amassed a large section of Bengal's working men as his followers (Chakraborty, 1975: 75). Zakaria presumably wielded considerable influence among the Kutchi Memons and owned a firm called 'Haji Jackariah Mahomed and Company,' besides serving as the secretary of the Calcutta-based Indian Trades Association and as an advisor to the British in promulgating the first Factories Act of 1881 (Banka, 2021; Chakraborty, 1975: 75).

The emergence of Zakaria Street cannot be pinpointed easily; however, its early development seems to have been co-terminus with the construction and development of the adjoining Central Avenue. In 1914, the Calcutta Improvement Trust took up the 'Central Avenue Scheme' in concurrence with the need for a north-south thoroughfare between Chitpore Road and Cornwallis Street, which was also manifested in an 1854 map drawn by the alderman William Clark, that projected a line linking up Bagbazaar in the north and Dharmatala to its south (Bandopadhyay, 2022: 89). The Central Avenue Scheme, undertaken during the First World War and the early interwar period (1914-1928), thus began as an urban renewal scheme that "recycled more than 200 acres of prime land in the inner city and displaced at least 50,000 individuals from the densely populated neighbourhoods of Soorti Bagan, Jorabagan, Jorasanko, and Colootola" (Ibid) and Zakaria Street can be thought to have taken shape during this rehauling scheme.

The street was primarily dominated by Muslim *bustees* or shanties before the landlords started selling sections of land along the street to the wealthy Marwari traders, who were arriving in Calcutta from Rajasthan. The poor Muslim shanty dwellers often found themselves displaced by their Muslim landlords and subsequently by the Marwaris, while only the wealthy Muslim traders and shopkeepers kept themselves afloat by owning buildings and properties along the street, successfully resisting the advancements of the realtors and the landlords (Banka, 2021). The establishment of the Calcutta Improvement Trust in 1911 led to massive development schemes being undertaken in Soorti Bagan and Zakaria Street. This led to the erasure of the *bustees* to create space for the "new and valorized 'frontage properties," as the dwelling spaces were converted into commercial establishments, while "existing tenants were driven out from these parts unceremoniously, monetary compensations were handed out to erstwhile property owners as consolation" (Bandopadhyay, 2022: 99-100). The Marwari business owners continued benefiting from these schemes, while their interventions added fuel to the already existing communal tension in that area. The proposal of the Marwari Association to widen and extend many streets also had an impact on this locality, as Zakaria Street was stretched and widened by 1916, and 'building sites abutting on it were sold at a satisfactory price' (Ibid: 85). The fault lines produced by the communal riots of 1910, which had witnessed protracted violence between Hindus and Muslims, were compounded by the recoupment and eviction program, as anti-Hindu resentment became deep-seated among the Muslims of Zakaria Street and its surroundings. The 1911 Census shows that Zakaria Street locality had changed 'beyond recognition' as a result of the work of the Improvement Trust (Thacker's Indian Directory 1918), which is further elucidated in the discussion below:

"The 1918 street directory names only three properties, but in the 1933 street directory, there are references to 54 properties along the same street. Of the 54 properties, the first 35 names between

Lower Chitpore Road and Surtee Bagan (also written as 'Surtibagan' and 'Soortee Bagan' in colonial documents) Lane refer to commercial establishments owned or occupied by people bearing Muslim names. In the Soorti Bagan area, where the Improvement Trust had launched its first scheme, the remaining properties were both predominantly commercial and had owners or occupants with Hindu Bengali (upper caste) and Marwari surnames" (Bandopadhyay, 2022: 85).

The dawn of the Marwari fiefdom on Zakaria Street was further crystallized by the settlements of some prominent Marwari families like the Oswals and the Maheshwaris (Banka, 2021). Krishna Kumar Birla, the celebrated industrialist, recalls that the men of his family had moved to Calcutta to make a fortune while the women would stay back at their ancestral homeland in Pilani, Rajasthan, and how the family had shifted to a house in Zakaria Street before his birth (Birla, 2007: 48). However, socio-political unrests that gripped the city between 1910 and 1926 had an impact on Zakaria Street as well. While the Hindu-Muslim riots would be ignited by local factors concerning the Hindus and the Muslims, the Marwaris often became the target of the Muslim mob (Chakraborty, 2017: 770). Besides the simmering resentment against the Marwaris for being migrants and encroachers, the other motivating factor behind the violence might have been the spectacular amount of wealth the community had amassed, which stood in stark contrast with the impoverished Bengali Hindus and Muslims residing in that area. Birla describes the incendiary situation of the locality during communal riots in a vivid manner:

"Whenever there was a communal riot in the city, we had to live in constant tension. Once, during one of these riots which probably took place around 1920, our house was surrounded by a riotous Muslim mob. We had many faithful servants including a brave durwan from upcountry named Ashta Singh. Whenever the house was in danger of being attacked, our servants immediately locked the entrance to the house. Ashta Singh would then take a gun and resort to blank fire" (Birla, 2007: 60).

The constant threat of violence made the Birla family exit Zakaria Street and settle in Rainey Park in the southern part of the city, a move replicated by other Marwari families of the locality. The mass exodus of the Marwaris by the 1950s not only impoverished the locality culturally and financially, but some of the grand mansions inhabited by them were either sold or leased. The street is currently marked by its chaotic atmosphere and haphazard modern constructions, as this once-residential neighbourhood now functions as a commercial district, with trucks, shops, restaurants, moving companies, garment stores, gemstone shops, and electrical appliances shops reigning supreme. Only a handful of families from the Muslim and Marwari communities still reside in the locality. The emptying mansions along the street "have been subdivided into smaller parts, with some having been converted into office spaces, while others into residential units. While some residents have remained here because of the nostalgia and the attachment to their family's heritage, for others, the reasons are

financial" (Banka, 2021). The scars of communal riots might still exist unconsciously in the collectively memory of the two communities inhabiting the locality, but they have, over the years, after numerous episodes of friction and tensions, learned to co-exist and celebrate a syncretic culture, observing the rapid changes that have engulfed the area and the city. Zakaria Street is no longer associated with communal tensions, as the erstwhile tensions seem to have paved the way for a hermeneutics of reconciliation and mutual adjustment.

The Co-Spatial Dynamics of the Street

The Zakaria Street locality is characterized by intersections and overlapping of two socio-cultural and spatial layers, which could be roughly identified as the Hindu and Islamic layers. While this locality is characterized by a dense concentration of the Muslim population and an overabundance of Islamic cultural relics, it functions as a cultural bubble in the larger Hindu-majority ecosystem of the city. This narrow street and its surroundings are marked by complex juxtapositions of a mosque, a Hindu temple, restaurants, guest houses, roadside stalls, gemstone shops, garment stores, pharmacies, and barber shops, which are manned by both Hindu and Muslim residents. It often gets "choked with vehicles transporting goods, traders, labourers and hawkers, making it a challenge to navigate on foot. Clustered around the masjid, where the street ends to meet Rabindra Sarani, there are permanent as well as street side shops selling everything from garments and *ittar* to meats and kebabs" (Banka, 2021). While labels like 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' cultures might seem outrageous and imply the denial of a unified culture, this article would argue that this unified culture (described as the *Ganga-Jamunitehzeeb*) is a product of a co-spatial arrangement of distinct spaces, realities, and cultures, one indigenous (Hindu) and the other foreign (Islam), which operate simultaneously in this locality, and the mere underscoring of these components does not repudiate the existence of a greater unifying culture.

The idea of 'co-spatiality,' conceptualized by the French geographer Jacques Lévy (2021), points out a specific type of interspatiality or relation between spaces, where the "vertical superimpositions of different spaces which 'occupy' the same extent...hinges on the axiom of a possible 'vertical' (that is: without distance or inclusion) superimposition of different social realities" (Lévy, 2021: 2). It refers to a vertical interconnection between two distinct but overlapping spaces or realities occupying a common extent, where "each of these realities is involved in spatialities (i.e.-spatial acts and spatial agencies) which are simultaneously situated in the same *here*" (Ibid: 2). Any urban space is characterized by overlapping spaces and realities and complicated by the movement of different groups and actors (Iori, 2022). Zakaria Street is no exception in this regard, where two socio-cultural and religious layers, represented by the Muslim and Marwari communities, inhabit the same space, yet they are engaged vertically on top of the other, which allows interlayer dialogues and transactions. The physical

space provided by the street and its surroundings acts as the 'base map' which remains independent of other layers, yet sums up all other spaces and realities that function upon it. The following sections will highlight how the Hindu and Muslim spatial-cultural layers have formed a complex arrangement of religious structures, residential buildings and commercial sites, which characterize the locality as "an arrangement of various spatialities [and realities]...seen as a series of superposed layers" (Lévy, 2021: 8).

While communal riots and tensions have characterized Indian politics on an unprecedented scale since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, scenes of co-existence and harmony could be cited time and again in favour of the secular framework of the nation, where Zakaria Street has emerged as a microcosm of Indian secularism, which endorses *Sarva Dharma SamaBhava* ('Equal treatment to all religious pathways'), an idea espoused by Mahatma Gandhi as "an effective basis for a tolerance on which to premise a just inter-religious peace and harmony" (Heredia, 2009: 12). This is best understood by the presence of the Nakhoda Mosque and the Jabreswar Shiva Temple on this street, the two religious structures representing Islam and Hinduism. Despite being positioned in the same locality, they throw up different religio-spatial matrices, but "in practice interactions between [these] different spatial units and their respective logics do occur" (Lévy, 2021: 5). This article proposes that, in the interactions and overlapping between these religious spaces, the street itself acts as a 'switch,' which enables linkage between different grids, "making it possible to move from one layer to another" (Christ, 2022: 1).

The Nakhoda Mosque, inaugurated in 1926, is the largest in West Bengal and Eastern India. Built under the benefaction of Abdar Rahim Osman, hailing from the Kutchi Memon community of Muslims of Kutch in Gujarat, can hold nearly 10,000 people on four levels (Bach, 2006: 592). Built upon an existing small mosque, the present structure was influenced by Emperor Akbar's tomb at Sikandra, and its main entrance was fashioned after the Buland Darwaza of Fatehpur Sikri. Armed with two minarets and domes, the red brick mosque's Indo-Sarasenic architecture not only reinvigorates the memories of the Mughal Empire but seems to have been "a conscious choice to make a Muslim statement in a city conspicuously lacking in them" (Ibid: 593). The mosque gets decked up in lights during Ramadan, as it lets the devotees know if the moon of Eid can be seen by lighting the minaret tops. The overlapping of the adjoining culinary space and the mosque's sacred space can be traced back to the establishment of a mercantile district by the Kutchi Memons, who traded with Burma, Ceylon, Java, and Singapore. The mosque itself is a relic of that trading hub since traders were behind its establishment and the first Muslim restaurants of this area emerged as a result (Banka, 2023).

While the grand ornate gateway to the mosque, located at the intersection of Chittaranjan Avenue and Zakaria Street, symbolically absorbs the entire locality within the sacred jurisdiction of the mosque,

the non-Islamic sites; such as, the temple and the house of a Vaishanavite family, appear as bubbles and their borders are contiguous with the mosque's extended sacred space, forming unique interreligious and interspatial dialogues. The Jabreswar Mahadev temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, stands at the intersection of Zakaria and Mandir Streets. The brief history of the establishment of the temple is enunciated by a stone engraving written in archaic Bengali on its front side, which states that the temple was established by one Shyama Kaviraj on the auspicious day of Dahami in 1725 Shakabda [Saka Era] or the Christian year 1823. It houses the stone idol of Shiva, known as 'Jabreswar Mahadev,' with a stone sculpture of the deity's bull Nandi facing the idol. Despite its diminutive presence, the temple bears the tragic fingerprints of communal conflicts. The temple committee's annual souvenir (2000) states that the idol was destroyed twice, and the arsonic phase of the Great Calcutta Killing of 1946, orchestrated by the All India Muslim League, led to the temple's destruction, which was later rebuilt by the devotees and the idol was reinstated with assistance from the-then ruler of Burdwan, possibly Sir Uday Chand Mahtab. Though its stature on the city's religious map is incomparable with that of the neighbouring mosque, the temple is visited by many devotees every day, and Shaivite festivals like Maha Shivaratri, Shravan Mahotsav, Maha Rudrabhishek are routinely observed, which have also spawned miraculous sagas on the deity's divine prowess. The location of the temple and the mosque on the same 'basemap' not only transforms this crowded trading district into a spiritual highway but also signifies an attempt at communal reconciliation against a hostile history of conflict, where the same street witnesses the overlapping of simultaneous celebrations of contradictory events like Shivaratri, Ramadan, and the selling of formidable beef, all within a distance of a few meters. The street, therefore, provides a transition from one sacred space to another and enables switching between different religio-cultural matrices.

Besides the sacred spaces, the other two prominent overlapping spatial tiers of this locality seem to be residential and commercial. The locality's dominant Islamic culture is perceived through a throng of shops primarily addressing a Muslim clientele, often giving the semblance of a medieval Arabic city. The street is cluttered with stores of gemstone sellers; Islamic apparel, namely, hijab*, naqaab, abata,* and Stoll for women and *sherwani* and *kurta* for men; pharmacies selling both modern and traditional *unani* medicines. Unlike other pharmacy shops in Kolkata, the ones on Zakaria Street are distinguished by the name *dawakahanas*, indicating the prevalence of traditional Islamic medical practices. There are perfumers selling *ittar*, carpet shops; salon and offices of Hajj tour organizers. These are to name a few. This close arrangement of different stores and establishments undoubtedly lends this place an exotic flavour, as if time has been wound back to medieval times. However, the guest houses and transport companies scattered across the locality, which send truckloads of commodities to different parts of the country and abroad, seem to be owned by Hindus, as they are

named after Hindu deities like Shiva, Durga, and Krishna. This complex map of commercial spaces shows an inter-communal synergy operating, where economic needs have brought the two communities to a transactional culture.

Tucked between these diverse spaces are other exotic spatial narratives. The palatial residential building of Gauhar Jaan (1873-1930), one of the first recording vocal artists of the country is located right beside Nakhoda Mosque. This bears rickety signatures of the opulent life of one of the most successful Indian musicians. It is interesting to note the contiguity of the mosque, a sacred site sanitized of any earthly profanity, and this building owned by a singer with a flamboyant and lascivious lifestyle. The chequered configuration of sacred and profane, and opulence and religiosity, underscores a culture of acceptance that allowed the co-existence of a controversial courtesan and a religious site on the same street. Previously known as the 'Gauhar Building,' and currently called 'Salim Manzil,' the building is a palimpsest of memories. While music resounded in every corner in its heydays, the currently dilapidated building has had a long history of transfer of ownership and litigations and Gauhar's opulent days have been overwritten by the mundane practices of its present residents. Sights of clothes drying from parapet grills and a fleet of shops on the ground floor selling a variety of goods from hardware to foreign currency (Sampath, 2012: 262) seem to be a shocking transformation to this space. Mention may also be made of the old mansion of Carrimjee Allibhoy Merchant, which is reminiscent of a forgotten Parsi heritage of the locality. Built of red brick with a heavy iron gate and a white marble plaque still bearing this name, this dilapidated mansion was supposedly owned or named after Carrimjee, who, according to a 1956 edition of Foreign Commerce Weekly, published by the United States Department of Commerce, was a wealthy export and commission merchant of shellac and paint in Calcutta, who traded with western companies (Banka, 2021). Like the surrounding mansions, the precarious existence of the Carrimjee mansion now serves as a relic of the now-dwindling Parsi community of the city and indicates the cosmopolitan culture of an overtly 'Islamized' city street. No well-defined boundaries, therefore, separate different spaces in this locality, and the complex arrangement of these spaces, inhabited by various communities demonstrating urban mobility, shows the "fascinating but dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different contiguous, but otherwise widely separated, worlds" (Park et al., 1925: 41).

It is interesting to observe the co-spatiality of different overlapping, often contesting culinary spaces in this locality. Along with makeshift food stalls during the Ramadan months, the street is characterized by close and often overlapping arrangements of different restaurants and eateries, manned by Hindus and Muslims alike. The Rajasthan Guest House, supposedly established by the Marwari residents emigrating from Rajasthan, offers vegetarian dishes to its customers, in consonance with the dominant tradition of meat abstinence seen within this community. The glowing devotion to the Hindu

deity Ganesha is visible from its signboard saying 'Shree Ganesh' and it tethers this space not only to a distinct culinary but also to a sacred tradition of the Marwari homeland. A similar vegetarian eatery called Annapurna Bhojanalaya located on the adjacent Tarachand Dutta Street testifies not only to a tradition of non-violence and spiritualism practiced by the Hindu community but also towards an effort to carve out a distinct identity in a larger Islamicate ambit and preserve the cultural relics of the once-dominant Marwari community that inhabited the locality. Alongside these 'Hindu' culinary spaces, the street is shared by eateries and restaurants managed by Muslims, like the Bombay Hotel, Taskeen, Dilli 6, and Benazir Hotel. Against the strict vegetarian injunction followed in Rajasthan Guest House and Annapurna Bhojanalaya, the Muslim eateries are known for selling delectable meat items like *kebabs*, *chaap, nihari,* and *haleem*; offered in different versions like chicken, mutton and also beef. While the Hindus have traditionally abhorred beef consumption, with the Marwaris especially known for following strict vegetarianism, it is interesting to note how the same locality harbours two contradictory culinary spaces offering vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals simultaneously. As the religious symbols of the Hindu deities like Annapurna and Ganesha function as markers for culinary spaces managed by the Hindus, the Arabic or Urdu names like 'Taskeen' and 'Benazir' function as signifiers for the Muslim proprietors and the separate culinary spatio-cultural matrices they offer. As a switch, the street offers transitions from one culinary space to another and acts as a mediator between two contradictory yet overlapping culinary cultures, negotiating differences and fostering understanding and mutual co-existence.

The Gastronomic Geography

The advent of the month of Ramadan turns Zakaria Street into an open-air exhibition of delectable food items, as hundreds of epicureans from across Kolkata and beyond flock to this culinary hotspot to cherish the tastes of Delhi and Awadhi cuisines. The *iftar* market of this locality buzzes into action as soon as evening descends on the horizon. Makeshift roadside stalls, restaurants, and food carts offering a wide range of delicacies, such as "[s]ucculent kebabs, flavourful *haleem*, creamy *faloodas*, *sheermal*, halwa-puri" (Alexander, 2023), populate almost every nook and cranny of this narrow and congested street, creating a semblance of Aminabad or Alambagh, the culinary centres of Lucknow. Along with the Chinese-dominated Sun Yat-Sen Street of the Poddar Court locality, located just a kilometer away, Zakaria Street has emerged over the years as one of the principal melting pots of history, gastronomy, architecture and culture in Kolkata. While the Park Street area, known for its anglicized culture, remains popular for its annual jamboree during Christmas, the food festival of Zakaria Street, despite lacking official patronage, almost serves as an Islamic response to the apparent Judaeo-Christian ethos and sentiments that characterize the buildings, eateries, institutions and visitors of Park Street and the associated annual Christmas festivity.

While the bouquet of food is prepared for the Muslim residents stepping out of the Nakhoda Mosque after offering their evening prayers, the shops have expanded their clientele to welcome epicureans, enthusiasts, and food vloggers from different religious and cultural communities. Every year, the *iftar* market materializes itself with "around 100 temporary stalls and 30-odd permanent restaurants during Ramzan [sic]. While most of these stalls sell unbeatable Awadhi cuisine, many also sell garments, *ittar,* home décor items, utensils, and other things" (Mitra and Chakraborty, 2019). Besides the roadside stalls, restaurants and eateries on and around Zakaria Street, such as, Adam's Kebab, Dilli 6, Taskeen, Al Baik, Sufiya, and Lucknow Restaurant serve eclectic platters of exotic Mughlai and Awadhi delicacies, ranging from snack items like *bakarkhani* and *sheermal* to desserts like *falooda* and *firni.* While the theological and spiritual aspects of Ramadan might not always capture the attention of the Hindu-majority visitors, its gastronomic dimension has functioned as a great attractor to draw them to an overtly Islamic territory and cherish the unique food culture brought to India by the Islamic merchants and conquistadors. The Kutchi Memon community, which has historically inhabited Zakaria Street, is widely known for its passionate association with food. Although *malpua* and *queemachaaps* dominate their kitchens as part of the *iftar* menu, a few unique recipes having antecedents in Gujarat, their native homeland, have been forwarded down the generations, such as, the china grass *halwa*, which is a Ramadan specialty (Banka, 2023). Although the destructive and proselytizing spirit of the Mughal rule in the Indian subcontinent is widely condemned by the Hindu nationalists, it seems to be utterly impossible to decouple the Mughals and their cuisines from the gastronomic habits of the Bengalis. The return of the Mughal Emperor Humayun (1508-1556) to India from Safavid Iran in 1555, resulted in the immigration of several Persian aristocrats, scholars, warriors, artists, and most importantly, chefs, who spread across India and a few settled in Bengal. The conquest of Bengal in 1576, by Emperor Akbar (1542-1605), Humayun's successor, not only witnessed the emergence of Dhaka as the capital of Mughal-controlled Bengal but also saw the crystallization of power of these Persian aristocrats (later known as the Ashrafs) and their culinary culture in Bengal (Sengupta, 2022: 60). The influx of Islamic cuisine in Kolkata can be traced back to nearly three hundred years, when Muhammad Reza Khan (1717-1791), the *Naib Diwan*, the regional administrative officer of the Mughal Empire of Bengal, built his mansion in the Chitpur locality, and consequently a Muslim habitat, along with some eateries, came into existence. The construction of two mosques in the Tollygunge and Dharmatala regions of the city by Prince Ghulam Muhammad Sultan Khan (1795-1872), the exilic son of the Mysore regent Tipu Sultan, also led to the expansion of Islamic cuisine in Kolkata. Food stalls and eateries gradually emerged around these mosques and were gradually absorbed into the culinary smorgasbord of the Bengalis (Ibid: 62). Similar patterns could be observed in Zakaria Street as well. Several food stalls, specializing in Mughal or Awadhi

cuisines, manned by Muslim residents, mushroomed around the Nakhoda Mosque from the early twentieth century, resulting in the complex cohabitation of the culinary and the spiritual in the same space, where the street functions as the fragile threshold and a hyphen betwixt the mosque's spiritual space and the larger culinary ambit that surrounds it.

The transformation of Zakaria Street, a regular public thoroughfare, into a site of culinary exhibition and festivity during Ramadan essentially underscores the fluidity of the public spaces, which facilitate "interactions and exchanges that go beyond the religious and cultural. They help create neighbourhoods by sharing space and nurture the social fabric" (Koppikar, 2024). The festive period not only witnesses material transactions between Muslim shopkeepers and primarily Hindu customers, but it also marks the confluence of two cultures and ideologies, negotiated by the agency of the culinary. This festivity not only functions as a "simple rupture in the mundaneity of the everyday life of the urban citizens," but its symbolic and affective dimensions "provoke the re/negotiation of individual and group identity and place-based heritage through representational displays of meaning" (Finkel and Platt, 2020: 2). The Ramadan festival generates a unique coordinate of space and time, whereby the Hindu and the Muslim communities, sharing a history of prolonged socio-political frictions in the Indian subcontinent, are brought together in a transactional relationship that bolsters community bonding. With the onward march of Hindu nationalism and resultant cultural otherization of some ethnic groups, the Indian Muslims are allegedly leading a precarious existence. High-pitched Hindutva campaigns by some political parties also touched this locality during the recent elections, which presumably deepened the fault lines already existing between the two communities. However, this window of festivity creates a culinary carnivalesque, which could be described by taking cues from Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis in his seminal work *Rabelais and His World* (1968). The carnivalesque, according to Bakhtin, is typified by the idea of a collective whole with no hierarchies and characterized by "rebelling against social norms before the community made a sober return to normalcy after the temporary period of festivity" (Ibid: 3). This Ramadan carnivalesque, mediated by the culinary agency, certainly does not completely efface the existing hierarchies between the two communities but provides an interface for mutual dialogues by upending the existing social barriers, thereby upholding the idea of a city, which "appear[s] as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live or visit, to play and consume in" and represents the existence of a 'dynamic community' to the outside world (Harvey, 1989: 9). This is countenanced in the saga of the three musketeers: Ravi Chourasia, Afzal Khan, and Faizal Khan, who are visitors to Zakaria Street and are emblematic of the spirit of inclusiveness that define the street and the locality:

"His [Chourasia's] family members are strict vegetarians. Chourasia has just returned from Ujjain, where the Mahakaleshwar temple is an annual destination for his family members at the start of

Chaitra (the first month of the Hindu calendar) Navratri. But his religion has never stood in the way of his friendship with Ali and Khan. "We have grown up together. I have eaten at their places and they have eaten at mine. Nothing can change that relationship," said Chourasia, whose family owns a "pure veg" eatery on Tarachand Dutta Street in the same neighborhood" (Mitra, 2022).

The transactional relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim populations, therefore, not only signifies dialogues between two communities but also interactions between two separate socio-cultural layers, engaged in a curious practice of co-spatiality. Interactions between layers require the presence of 'switches' or connectors linking up the layers (Lévy, 2021: 3), and the food stalls and eateries could be interpreted as performing the role of the primary switches between the Hindu and Islamic socio-cultural layers, which simultaneously share the same space.

The culinary bonanza at Zakaria Street also provides enthusiasts from the Hindu community with the formidable taste of beef and sets a critical example of turning the existing religio-political currents in India around the 'cattle question' upside down. The consumption of beef has always been a contested issue in India since cattle are much adored and revered as sacred beings by Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Prohibition of cattle slaughter has been historically endorsed by spiritual and political leaders like Dayananda Saraswati, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi and taken forward by Hindu nationalist organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Hindu traditions have praised and respected cows since they exemplify munificence and maternal love: "The cow is venerated as the great provider and is naturally therefore identified with the earth and regarded as too sacred to be killed" (Brockington, 1996: 205). The voluntary, self-imposed restriction on beef by the Hindu-majority population of the country also finds echoes in the Constitution of India, as Article 48 under the Directive Principles of the Constitution mentions that "the state administration shall make necessary arrangements to re-organize agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines," besides emphasizing that "the state shall endeavour to prohibit slaughtering and smuggling of cattle, calves, and other milch and draught cattle" (National Law University 2012: 234). While the protection of cows is celebrated in Hinduism as an expression of compassion that simultaneously acknowledges humans' power over other creatures and their vulnerability before the divine agency (Kemmerer, 2012: 59), it has taken an insidious turn with the advent of cow vigilantism in India. Mob-induced violence, perpetrated by Hindu extremists on non-Hindu, especially Muslim communities, in the name of *gauraksha* [cow protection] has led to alleged harassment, torture, and even murder of several individuals since 2014. The infamous 2015 case of Muhammad Akhlaq, a Muslim resident of Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, being lynched by a frenzied mob, who suspected that the victim was in possession of beef in his refrigerator, drew national headlines and criticism (Chandra, 2018: 135). Against the backdrop of the surging

Hindu nationalist tendencies in the national socio-cultural theatre, West Bengal remained surprisingly immune to the restrictions on beef. The state, with a thriving Muslim population constituting nearly thirty percent of its demography, has never imposed any ban on cow slaughter. Despite being a Hindu-majority state and occasional demands from different Hindu activist groups to discontinue cow slaughter, the Government of West Bengal has never really taken any initiatives in this direction, while this nonchalance has often been interpreted as an act of minority appeasement. Although the Bengali Hindus turned averse to the consumption of beef during the Bengal Sultanate period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, with medieval Bengali writers like Bijoy Gupta and Mukundaram Chakraborty associating beef with the Muslim populace in their literary works like *Manasamangal* and *Chandimangal* (Sengupta, 2022: 56-57), the liberal and Western-educated section of the Bengali Hindus did not altogether shun the practice of beef consumption, which finds expression in Zakaria Street. The eateries and food stalls here have earned both fame and notoriety for the sale of beef delicacies. Sufia, one of the most celebrated outlets in the locality, located just opposite Nakhoda Mosque, is an important outlet selling several beef dishes, while their flagship item beef *nihari* tops the chart during the winter months. Footfalls in front of Sufia in the wintry dawns intersect with the mellifluous call of the *fazr [morning] prayers* in the Mosque, as *nihari*, a spicy and hot broth topped with meat, is served en masse. A snapshot of the morning congregation of gastrophilessavoring a formidable meaty taste elucidates the reigning excitement:

"It is 4.40 am but Sufia Restaurant, opposite the Nakhoda Mosque on Zakaria Street, is already abuzz with activity. An elderly man wrapped in a shawl sits on a raised tandoor with a sealed daegh (a large traditional handi). Beside him is a man chopping ginger and green chilli, while another group is making dough balls and stuffing some of them with dal [lentil]. Before the patience of those who have assembled outside in cars, bikes, and on foot wears off, the man removes the lid and uncovers the dough. A cloud of smoke slowly escapes the large opening and suddenly everything around is warm" (Javed, 2019).

While different types of bread like *tandoori roti, khameeri roti, shirmals, parathas* and *dalpuris* accompany beef-encrusted *nihari*, other items with shreds of beef like *biryani, halim,* and *kebabs* also enjoy considerable popularity among the customers. Other important food joints on Zakaria Street and its surroundings, such as, the Adam Kebab, Bombay Hotel, Aminia and Dilshad cater to the customers with dishes like beef *boti kebab,* beef *malai kebab,* beef *chnamp,* beef *korma* and beef Awadhi *biryani;* to name a few, which are savoured by a significant section of the Hindu customers. This indeed sends out a strong political message in the debate regarding personal versus communal choice, individuality versus collective demand. While many Bengali Hindus tasting beef have historically irked their peers, the absence of any significant backlash or ban on its sale in the concerned

locality reinforces the liberal and critical outlook of the Bengali population, which seems to be nose diving in the rest of India with the spread of political conservatism and liberal backsliding.

Reinforcing Harmony through Street Walks

The politics of West Bengal is chiefly defined by occasional outbursts of violence, polarization along communal lines, rampant corruption, and the distribution of freebies to the marginalized population. The electoral times transform the state into a fiery cauldron of competitive communalism, as the Leftist and associated political parties allegedly engage in the appeasement of the Muslim community, while the Hindutva forces attempt to earn political brownie points by appeasing the Hindu-majority population. The existing mode of violence in the state "can be termed as entirely 'political' in nature, as violence has been predominantly used to capture political power and maintain an iron grip on the key levers of state power. It is different from violence in the other states of India, with socio-cultural, ideological or economic factors largely made subservient to the cause of political domination and rampant polarising partisanships" (Ghosh and Sahoo, 2022: 8). This incendiary situation featuring violence and communal polarization is further exacerbated by the rise of Islamic terrorism in West Bengal sponsored by militants and often materialized through illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, who have been allegedly sheltered by the ruling political dispensations over the years.

A symbolic exit route from this stifling and communally surcharged atmosphere is offered by a series of urban walks that aim to foster communal harmony and cultural syncretism. Zakaria Street has incidentally emerged as a laboratory for this socio-cultural experimentation. 'Know Your Neighbour' (KYN) is one such social initiative to foster communal harmony, undertaken by the Kolkata-based SABAR Institute, a public policy research group (Mitra, 2022). It organizes a series of neighbourhood walks involving students from different universities to learn about the city's population and cultural dynamics. These walks enable the participants to engage in dialogues with the residents of a locality and have a first-hand experience of that area's social realities. Besides bolstering community awareness, they can be seen as simultaneously acting as an innovative source of learning and for preserving the city's unique heritage, since they function as a recreational activity for exploring heritage and a potential tool of heritage management (Saiyed et al., 2007). The first walk was organized during June and July of 2016, which explored Zakaria and Colootola Street to provide the participants with a panoramic view of the lives of the Muslim residents of this locality during Ramadan. Nearly fifty participants from different religio-cultural communities participated in the Iftar celebration to understand how peaceful cohabitation could be achieved by the Hindu and Muslim communities despite theological differences (Know Your Neighbour, 2019). While Zakaria Street and its surroundings are often frequented by enthusiasts during Ramadan festivities, many remain oblivious to its historical and cultural narratives, which are dissected during these walks. These exploratory walks not only chart

Zakaria Street but also cover its neighbouring streets and remarkable landmarks, such as the traditional Unani *dawakhanas* or medicine shops on Colootola Street; the *thakurbati* of Balaich and Dutta along Kabiraj Lane; Purnachandra Dutta's house on Phears Lane; the Muhammad Ali Library on Kanai Seal Stree;, to name a few (Mitra, 2019). The close and complex arrangement of these sites underscores peculiar interference patterns, where the Hindu and Islamic cultures, despite positioned dialectically; inform each other through dialogic interactions. While Ayurveda remains the most popular branch of traditional medicines in India, the age-old Unani medicine shops remind one of the undercurrents of Islamic traditional medicines being still in vogue, since the days of Mughal rule. Phears Lane, a neighbouring pathway of Zakaria Street, located well within the Islamicate ambit of the latter, is not only the home to Purnachandra Dutta, visited by the celebrated Hindu mystic Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886), who played a significant role in promoting interfaith harmony in colonial Bengal, but also to Haji Allauddin Sweets and Adam's Kebab; two of the most-visited places by the gastrophiles, the manufacturers of the much-cherished sweet *aflatoon* and *sutli* kebab, respectively (Mitra, 2019). This close network of streets functions as a switch between the spiritual dimension signified by two of the veritable symbols of Hinduism and Islam in Bengal; Ramakrishna and Nakhoda Mosque; and the mundane and sensuous dimension symbolized by the restaurants and sweet shops. The idea of religio-cultural syncretism is further bolstered by the Muhammad Ali Library, located just adjacent to Zakaria Street. Established in 1930, it remains a repository of rare books in Urdu, Arabic, and Persian languages, along with the Urdu versions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* the two principal Indian epics (Sengupta, 2019). While these two epics are considered to be the highest achievements of Sanskrit literature and the ancient Hindu civilization, their transcriptions in Urdu, possibly meant for dissemination among the Muslim populace, suggest an attempt at promoting intercultural dialogues that characterize this locality.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of competitive communalism, minority appeasement, and Hindu nationalism taking West Bengal hostage, the multicultural and multi-religious character of Zakaria Street seems to be a beacon of hope for fostering communal and cultural harmony. The co-existence of contesting spaces and cultural strands that characterize this locality has undoubtedly been achieved after a long period of communal tensions and conflicts. The high density of interactions between different communities has prevented unilateralism in culture. The residents have gradually honed "the skill of efficiently practicing different layers of the same space, that is, to master co-spatiality as part of the self's own spatiality" (Lévy, 2021: 10). Despite an overarching Islamic culture, the Hindu cultural relics have not been suppressed and exist in an equation of complementarities with the dominant Islamic relics. The co-spatiality of Zakaria Street "brings together potentially scattered and diverging

universes in a common 'extent' and establishes a modest dialogue between them" (Ibid). Though this one instance of communal harmony cannot be brandished to airbrush the raging issues of communal persecution, ethnic cleansing, mass conversion, iconoclasm, and religious hatred that remain as faultlines between the Hindu and the Muslim communities, the spatial-cultural dialogism of this locality can show a way forward to the rest of the country.

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