EXPLORING NEW SITES OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Conversations with the founder members of the Patna Collective in India

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Colophon

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Pluralism Working Paper no 7

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Welcome to the *Pluralism Working Paper series* for the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme. The series provides a vehicle for early dissemination of knowledge and aims to reflect the broad range and diversity of theoretical and empirical work that is undertaken by academic researchers and civil society based development practitioners in association with the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme.

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On behalf of the international Promoting Pluralism Programme staff, we thank you for your interest in our working papers.

Caroline Suransky, Hilde van 't Klooster and Ute Seela

Editors of the *Pluralism Working Paper series*

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Editor´s preface

This paper offers critical insights into contemporary social transformation processes and ways in which Civil Society Organisations are currently challenged to rethink their engagement with sites of social change. The paper is based on conversations with Shahrukh Alam and Khalid Anis Ansari, who are the founding members of the Patna Collective. Their organisation is a research-activist collective, which is based in India, where they form part of the India Pluralism Program network. Their primary focus is to rethink the complex relationship between religion, faith and social action.

The first part of this paper is based on an interview which was conducted by Elise van Alphen, a PhD candidate at the University for Humanistic Studies, whose own research focuses on social movements in the Netherlands. In the interview, **Shahrukh Alam** explains the basic premises of the Patna Collective research approach. According to Alam, change begins with a conscious recognition that a given situation could be different. To understand and rethink both the given situations as well as the possibilities for change, the Patna Collective believes that Civil Society Organisations should conduct research by beginning to identify social spaces where movement exists among otherwise stagnant religious, gender and caste relationships. The Patna Collective conducts critical ethnographic research to analyse conflicts between Muslim factions and the state and to identify alternative political spaces. Alam argues: "Our interventions focus on the recognition and acknowledgement of spaces for dialogue between the Muslim community and the state, but also for dialogue between men and women, as well as between higher and lower castes within the Islamic community". One of the interesting claims of the Patna Collective is that these spaces for dialogue and reform cannot always be found within the classical political arena, the law, or in public debate, but are often entangled in the everyday life of people who live under marginalized circumstances and for whom it may be difficult to fight for their rights on a parliamentary, legal or civic levels. The Patna Collective studies and analyses how people in such positions exercise power and instigate reform in their own ways.

The second part of the paper is based on a dialogue between Hilde van 't Klooster who is a researcher at the Kosmopolis Institute and **Khalid Anis Ansari.** The interview gives us a remarkable insight into Ansari's personal journey that led to his engagement with the Patna Collective. His personal background simply and powerfully contextualises his motivation to establish the collective. Ansari narrates about small and major incidents of social injustices, violence and stereotyping he experienced or observed, which confronted him with his religious and caste identity in the Indian context. These were all incidents which made him aware of the complex and persisting challenges of pluralism and social justice in India. Ansari is committed to connect his strong personal knowledge base with an intellectual curiosity that feeds into the research-activist objectives of the Patna Collective and into his own research as a PhD candidate.

Together, these two parts of the paper give the readers a remarkable picture of the innovative work of the Patna Collective, as they explore new ways of engaging with social transformation and the ways in which this impacts on Indian politics of identity. One of the movements which is studied by the Collective is the Pasmanda Movement. This is a lower caste movement within the Muslim community in India, which aspires to forge new caste solidarities, by exceeding traditional religious identities, and by challenging the hegemony of the upper-caste Muslim elite. According to Ansari, the Pasmanda Movement claims that the monolithisation of religious identities and consequent instances of communal violence in India, are related to internal caste conflicts.

Throughout the paper, Ansari and Alam elaborate on their search for new ways to engage with sites of transformation. I believe that the work of the Patna Collective may offer an interesting example of the ways in which the Pluralism Knowledge Program focuses on rethinking Civil Society Organisations strategies for change. I hope that researchers and activists within the international knowledge program and beyond will be inspired by this example.

Caroline Suransky

Chief editor of the *Pluralism Working Paper series* for the Pluralism Knowledge Programme.

Moments of plurality

In conversation with Shahrukh Alam of the Patna Collective about sectarian violence and new spaces for pluralism in India[1]

Elise van Alphen

Co-founder Shahrukh Alam describes the Patna Collective as "an research activist group". Change begins with the conscious recognition that a given situation could be different. That requires research. Alam maintains that Civil Society Organisations aiming to address violence between religious communities and stimulate pluralism must first begin by identifying social areas where movement exists among otherwise stagnant religious, gender and caste relationships. "Even in marginalized positions, people have their own ways of exercising power and effecting change."

In 2006, Shahrukh Alam and Khalid Anis Ansari founded the Patna Collective, an research activist group in North India. "We simply took the name of the city where we began", explains Alam. Initially, the Patna Collective was impelled by Islamic liberation theology, which focuses on social justice and the viewpoint of marginalised groups. Motivated by this vision, Alam's research activist group supported the initiation of a small workers' collective. "Relatively quickly, however, we found ourselves wondering how this collective actually differed from a secular workers' collective. We also became aware that we were dictating people's behaviour. This, while they regularly had brilliant strategies for dealing with their own situation. We took a step back and are now observing the ways in which people in various places are instigating change independently."

The abstract citizen and sectarian violence

As a lawyer, Alam is well trained in the rhetoric of justice and the defence of human rights. Nevertheless, she has her own ideas about the way in which Civil Society Organisations approach people as abstract citizens with rights. "The human rights discourse often clashes with the mindset attached to the cultural or religious position of a minority. Minority groups often defend interests that are only of importance for the group itself. That is difficult to reconcile with the idea of universal equality of citizens and rights. In conflicts and debates between minorities and the state, such differing ways of thinking are always diametrically opposed. But we believe that they do not have to exclude each other. They need to be viewed as two discourses that can alternate and even be in dialogue with each other."

According to Alam, the focus on universal, secular discourse around human rights will not decrease sectarian violence, or the tensions and conflicts between religious groups. How could it, when the concrete "neutrality" of the secular state often results in the prevalence of the norms of Hindu-Brahman majority (approximating eighty percent) over those of minorities? Throughout history, tensions between the Hindu majority and religious minorities have escalated to several conflicts. This regularly equates to the strife between the Hindu majority and the largest religious minority in India, the Islamic population (fourteen percent), which also happens to suffer from a relatively high degree of poverty. The last major outbreak of violence between Hindus and Muslims occurred in 2002 when a Muslim group hijacked a train and set fire to Hindu passengers. A bloody conflict ensued in the aftermath and claimed predominantly Muslim victims. Tens of thousands of Muslims fled the Indian state of Gujarat.

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[1] A Dutch version of this interview was published in *Tijdschrift voor Humanistiek* No. 43 (2010).

Alam maintains that the Islamic minority's struggle for (the protection of) cultural rights also needs to be understood within this context. The Patna Collective carries out ethnographical studies to analyse conflicts between Muslim factions and the state. "What rights are Muslim communities fighting for? What rights do the government grant to the Islamic community? What types of tension result between the state and the Muslim community, but also within the Muslim community itself? We research how these Muslims negotiate their identity with the state, but also within their own community. We pay special attention to the dynamics and differences in caste, class and gender within the Islamic community."

The conflict between women's rights and cultural rights

Alam gives an example which illuminates both the struggle for the preservation of cultural rights within the Muslim community, as well as the internal discussions about that struggle which simultaneously take place. She describes the controversy that took place in the early eighties around the Muslim woman Shah Bano, who went to Supreme Court for her right to maintenance. There is no single category of Indian law that regulates family justice – issues related to custody, maintenance, inheritance, marriage and divorce – but five categories specified under "personal laws". Hindu law applies to Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains; Islamic law applies to Muslims; Christian law applies to Christians. A type of auxiliary legislation applies to smaller faith communities. The remaining category of "civil family law" provides a neutral option for citizens who do not fall under any of the religious categories or who refrain from the claim of any rights under religious legislation.

As a Muslim woman, Shah Bano was subject to Islamic family law. Sharia dictated that Bano had no right to maintenance from her ex-husband. She sought a better settlement through the courts. The Supreme Court ruled that Bano had a right to maintenance money guaranteed by Indian criminal law, which applied to all regardless of caste, gender, or religion. The judge even referred to stipulations in the Koran to justify his ruling, when Islamic legislation did not. "The orthodox Muslim community viewed this as an infringement of their right to autonomous, Islamic, family law. They understood it as an attack on their cultural rights", Alam explains. "They wanted the court to repeal this ruling. The debate became so emotionalised that the larger question about the place of women's rights in the Sharia was never addressed. The issue was reduced to the individual in question. Orthodox Muslims believed that Shah Bano had absolutely no right to go to court and demand maintenance. This point was already covered by Islamic law." The debate was further complicated by the rise of the Hindu right wing movement, which caused Muslims to no longer see the state as a neutral authority. "Indian nationalism could be viewed as Brahman nationalism", according to Alam. The situation became so escalated that the Indian government relented to the pressure set by the Muslim community. The court's decision was declared null and void by the introduction of new Islamic legislation which established maintenance for Muslim women; this is limited, however, to the length of the mourning period (three months). This legislation also dictates that Islamic women may not appeal to Indian criminal law for cases related to maintenance.

Not all Muslims perceived the above extension of Islamic legislation as the best means of protecting cultural rights, seeing as it did little to improve protection for the rights of Muslim women. Moreover, the larger question concerning the relationship between women's rights and the Sharia was completely evaded. "Most feminists – I won't call them Islamic feminists, but Muslims who are feminists – do not wish to condemn the Sharia for its breach of women's rights. Even apart from this breach, however, they found it difficult to embrace the Sharia as *the* cultural right. They suggested that the issue did not have to be reduced to the choice between a rejection or embrace of Islamic legislation. They maintained the need for possibilities for dialogue regarding women's rights and Islamic law. How much space does the Sharia itself allow for an improvement in the position of women?" Like the women who sought flexibility within Islamic legislation for women's rights, the Patna Collective seeks opportunities for dialogue between both parties. "There is a lot of room for reform in both the Sharia and the Indian legislative system – and we have to make this clear within the framework of a more just society. As the Patna Collective, we manoeuvre ourselves independently between the universalist position of the human rights discourse and the relativist position which dictates that all cultures are equal, thus rendering judgement impossible."

Alternative places for politics

Ethnographical studies conducted by the Patna Collective identify and unravel such issues as discussed above. "Our intervention must focus on the recognition and acknowledgement of spaces for dialogue between the Muslim community and the state, but also for dialogue between men and women, as well as between higher and lower castes within the Islamic community." Alam claims that these spaces for dialogue and reform cannot always be found within the classical political arena, the law, or public debate, but are often entangled in everyday life. As a result, they are insufficiently subject of political power analyses. "It is by no means easy to fight for your rights on a parliamentary, legal or civic level as an Indian Muslim, and especially not as an Indian Muslim woman from a lower caste. We asked ourselves how such individuals choose to take up the fight, then, indirectly. It appears, thus, that even people in marginalised positions have their ways of exercising power and instigating reform."

Alam gives an example: "Although the Muslim genocide of 2002 has officially been condemned,[2] many of the lawsuits for victims' reparations are still in progress, as well as the trials against perpetrators. This is a very slow process. And Muslims continue to be discriminated against. It is very difficult, for example, for a Muslim to rent or buy a house. An Islamic businessman secured a house, however, by playing on a Hindu colleague's sense of guilt for his political role in the Muslim genocide – and successfully espoused his help for a two-percent commission for the procurement of real estate." Is this an alternative way to deal with the situation? Alam is non-committal: "It is a difficult example, in that it can also be viewed in terms of the Muslim businessman's opportunism. But a moral denouncement raises questions in itself. On what basis are we actually judging him?"

Silent Muslim women

The next issue of the fatwa better illustrates how citizens have independently instigated reform. Some time ago in India, a number of journalists solicited a local Islamic leader for religious advise (fatwa) regarding the question of whether women were allowed to work within the government, and if so, how they should be dressed. "The journalists posed leading questions, but the answers given by the cleric were pretty absurd", tells Alam. "The priest replied that Muslim women were not allowed to work within the government due to consequent proximity with male colleagues. This fatwa received considerable media attention intended to portray Muslims as conservative and regressive. The press assumed that all Muslim women would indiscriminately follow this fatwa. It was precisely the reaction of the women in question that made this incident so interesting: they had none. The fatwa had failed to take the situation of Muslim women into consideration. They absolutely could not afford to heed the cleric's recommendation, so they had no choice but to ignore it. By doing so, the women undermined the reaction of the press and exercised power without engaging in polemics."

Alam search together with two other fulltime members and movement volunteers of the Patna Collective for similar instances which break the static opposition between the state and the minority. "From the start, we have been drawn to these types of narratives that build bridges between polemic positions. The *Pluralism Knowledge Programme* of HIVOS and Kosmopolis (UvH) gave us the theoretical tools to name and further analyse these moments of plurality and in doing so, hopefully stimulate them."

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[2] Many Muslims perceive the outbreak of violence that took place in 2002 against Muslims in Gujarat as a genocide. The Indian state describes the violence as the consequence of riots.

On Faith, Solidarity and Transformation

A conversation with Khalid Anis Ansari of the Patna Collective

Hilde van 't Klooster

Confrontations with identity constructions

You are one of the founding members of The Patna Collective, which calls itself a research-activist collective that aims to rethink the relationship between religion, or faith, and social action. In the context of The Patna Collective, you currently study the Pasmanda Movement, a term that refers to recent movements among lower-caste Indian Muslims. A short time ago, you were also appointed as a PhD student in the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Program, where you will continue your focus on the Pasmanda Movement.

I would like to talk with you about what motivates your research on this topic and in particular, about your view on the research-activism related to your own work. But maybe before we go into that, you could tell me something about the relationship between your personal background and The Patna Collective. You are one of the founding members of The Patna Collective. Why did you participate in this initiative?

I think my personal background and experiences in life so far are particularly relevant in contextualizing my motivation behind forming *The Patna Collective* and doing the kind of work that we have been doing ever since. I come from a Muslim family and received what could be considered a mainstream, secular education in a Catholic school in Lucknow, the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh. When I was in class twelve, that was the year 1992 to 1993.

I was seventeen or eighteen at that time, I suppose. The demolition of the Babri Masjid (mosque) took place on 6 December 1992,[3] during my preparations for board exams. Though my parents are both devout now, I was raised in a very secular environment, as my family was not particularly religious during my youth. I could not really make sense of what had happened. I didn't actually find the incident very disturbing. There was no real connection between my Muslim identity and the demolition of the mosque, because I did not really relate to religion in that sense.

But I remember quite clearly that after the demolition, my classmates directed strange and sarcastic remarks toward me. Some of them even addressed me as *katwa*, which is a pejorative term that alludes to someone who has been circumcised. Circumcision is obviously a part of Muslim faith. For the first time, circumstances led me to believe that I was *different*. I had never felt this way before. My friends and I played cricket and other sports together, just like normal students who got along. Yet following the demolition, things were never the same again. I was forced to realise that I was a Muslim. I was bracketed as belonging to a particular identity, and began to develop an unprecedented sense of "being Muslim."

After my board exams, I enrolled in the Honours Bachelor programme in Economics at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). It is based in a small provincial town of Aligarh in western Uttar Pradesh. Aligarh University had a unique history. It was built by Muslims in the first quarter of the last century and was also somewhat implicated for the Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. Many of the

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[3] The Babri Mosque at Ayodhya was demolished by cadres of fascist, right-wing Hindu organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on December 6, 1992. Their aim was to avenge the alleged demolition of a temple of the Hindu God Rama, which took place at the same site by the Mughal (Muslim) emperor Babar in the sixteenth century. The demolition in 1992 was followed by large-scale rioting and communal violence between Hindu and Muslims in many major Indian cities.

university's students were then active in the Muslim League Movement, the party which sought a separate Muslim state. According to the movement, Muslims were a separate 'nationality' and had a right to self-determination. But following Independence and the tragic Partition riots, which resulted in many casualties, the university was, arguably, cleansed of Muslim League elements and co-opted into the state education system. In a way, it became a mainstream university.

Historically speaking, even the initial impetus behind the Aligarh Movement in 1875 was to carve out a new, modern, educational space for Muslims that religious knowledge alone could not provide. This point of view stood in striking contrast to the dominant opinion of the Muslim religious scholars, who were acutely sceptical of western knowledge systems and languages, especially English. It was a progressive movement that sought to forge a neat balance between Western and Islamic systems of knowledge and encourage English as a language. But as it turned out, Aligarh also served as a haven for elite *ashraf* Muslims and, in many remarkable ways, continues to be that even now. Narratives reveal how students from poor and lower-caste Muslim families were looked down upon and mocked by those students stemming from feudal-aristocratic families.

I joined AMU in June 1993. The day I arrived in Aligarh, I was made aware of a conflict surrounding the burning of the national flag of India in the canteen a while back. This was a second shock for me within a period of six or seven months and felt like an affront to my secular sensibilities. The national flag had a special place in my heart. How could someone burn it like that? But over a period of time, I became acquainted with the narratives regarding problems faced by the Muslim identity in India. I also became familiar with the discourse on victimhood generated by anti-Muslim riots. It was the first time I became sensitised to such subjectivities and understandings.

One day afterwards, I was standing in a queue in the canteen when a classmate, whom I hardly knew, shouted at me from behind. "*Julahe*[2]...jaldi kar!" This translates to, "Make it fast, you *julaha*!". When I turned and looked at the student who had shouted, I saw that he was smiling, suggesting therefore that the remark had been made in jest. But this memory has stayed with me ever since. Later, when I discussed this incident with some other friends, I learned that *julaha*, referring to someone from the weaving caste, was commonly used in a pejorative manner, especially by the Muslim upper castes. I found this strange, because my father was not a weaver, but a civil servant. In an economic sense, I did not stem from a disadvantaged group.

During the course of my stay in Aligarh, I regularly overheard and sometimes encountered similar kinds of remarks. I realised that even the Muslim identity is not monolithic. Castes exist within it, and people from upper castes look down on people from lower castes, even when they are educated and stem from a good economic background. A sense of contempt subsists against lower-caste Muslims, which is embedded somewhere in the upper-caste Muslim consciousness. I must admit, however, that I was unable to understand the rationale behind this at the time.

Ideological Search: From Radical Islam to Marxism

So during this period these experiences made you more aware of two aspects of your identity: your Muslim identity and a caste identity.

Yes, and all in a very short time period. I continued my education and then got in touch with a few Islamic radicals on the campus. They were inspired by a host of writers: Sayyid Qutb, Hasan al-Banna, Ali Shariati, Murtaza Mutahhari, Maulana Maudidi, Kalim Siddiqui. I started to read these texts out of an interest in discovering Islam and what this discourse on religion and identity was all about. I should note that it was precisely during this period that I was also facing a crisis within my

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[2] The surname 'Ansari' is a title that was adopted by the Muslim weaver caste in the late nineteenth century. The Urdu or the Hindustani word for weaver is *julaha*, which is usually employed in popular folklore as a synonym for 'ignorant,' or more accurately 'ignoramus.' Various pejorative proverbs and stories are linked to weavers: 'One expression stems from a story: *Julaha bhulaile teesi ka khait* refers to the julaha who went to a mustard field by moonlight. Mistaking the blue mustard flowers for water, he dove and tried to swim. Another tale tells of a julaha who wept while listening to his family *maulvi* [religious teacher] read the Quran. The old *maulvi* was very impressed and asked which part of Quran had motivated the julaha to weep. The julaha replied, "I was looking at your beard, which sadly reminded me of my goat, who died yesterday." Another well-known story tells of one *julaha* who was about to go on a journey with his eleven friends. They decided to count themselves before they leftt. The julaha began to count, but kept forgetting to count himself. He broke into tears, saying, "I am dead. Make arrangements for my burial [...]". Source: Anwar, Ali. *Masawaat KI Jung (The Struggle for Equality)*, trans. Mohammad Imran Ali and Zakia Jowher. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2005.

own immediate family, as my parents' relationship reached a low ebb which led to a divorce a few years later.

I wanted, thus, to make some sense of my own 'self,' the changing context and a means to relate to that, both in the personal and public spheres. I soon developed a very strong normative sense of Islam. At that point, I was hardly twenty. I had strange ideas. I wanted to transform India into an Islamic state. I believed Islam to be the only true religion, that anything beyond Islam was false, and that it was my duty to propagate the Islamic ideology. But in hindsight I would say that my secular background was not reconciled with this approach to Islam. In a way, I was sceptical about both secularism and the Islamic discourse, though increasingly drawn to the latter.

What kind of questions did you have? What caused the tension?

It was a state of tension born of two ways of life. I had turned into a practising Muslim, someone I had never been before. Praying had made little sense to me prior to that. But there I was, praying five times a day, crying for the suppression of Muslims in Chechnya, Bosnia and elsewhere, trying to make sense of why Muslims were being persecuted everywhere. I stayed in this phase for a considerable time. I was simultaneously, however, being exposed to other secular ideologies like Marxism, whose emphasis on social justice was very appealing. One particular lecturer in the University, who belonged to a communist party, was instrumental in sparking my interest in Marxism. I met him quite often. But even while I read about other ideologies, the Islamic vision had a privileged place in my scheme of things.

Later, another strange event took place on campus. About eighty or ninety students suffered from food poisoning due to adulterated food served in the dining hall. They were admitted to hospital. Students assembled outside the Vice Chancellors' (VC) lodge in protest, but the VC didn't engage with them. Eventually, after I had already left the site, the VC called in the notorious Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC). The PAC fired at the students in response to the slightest provocation. One student was killed and several others were injured.

The following day, we asked various student leaders and unions from other colleges and cities to join our protest against this barbaric act. When a few of us went to the VC to discuss the incident, he callously remarked, "You are talking of only one student. In Kashmir eighty or ninety people are killed every day." Before becoming Vice Chancellor, this man had served as a senior civil servant in Kashmir. He continued, "Why is the campus community making such a fuss over the death of just one student?" We were absolutely stunned at this statement. A few students, including me, openly challenged the VC once in a public programme, accusing him of violating the democratic rights of free expression and peaceful protest of the students. He publicly responded by saying, "I do not believe in any damn democracy!"

Such events continued to take place on campus quite frequently. Since the elected student union had been banned and elections suspended, we had no organised forum to raise these issues. Some formed an organisation called the *Forum for Democratic Rights* (FDR), of which I became a member early on. FDR provided us with an opportunity to express our views on various concerns affecting campus life. It struck me that, amid these various protest actions and the campus unrest, the Islamists usually refrained from participation and maintained a distance.

I don't know why. At the time, I suspected they had some kind of connection with the VC. Yet in contrast, all the left-wing student groups, which were largely based in Delhi, joined and supported us wholeheartedly. This also made me wonder. If Islam is a religion of justice, and these events were explicit incidents of injustice, then how could those who claim to follow Islam and Islamic ethics refrain from becoming involved in these protest movements? The distinction between the Islamists and the Left became ever clearer to me. When it actually mattered, the Marxists, not the Islamists, came to our rescue.

Start of an Activist Life

So during this period, you were confronted with various events and identity constructions that deeply touched you. What impact did these experiences have on your aspirations?

All these events shaped me in various ways and forced me to become engaged with many perplexing issues. I had no clear idea of what to do in life. My desire to resolve these questions was a motivating factor, but I did not know how to go about it. I completed my MBA degree but hardly paid any attention to my academic studies. In the classroom, I was reading on marketing management and other subjects that really disgusted me, but outside of class I would read other political writings by Shariati and Marx, for example. Luckily, I graduated. Since the corporate sector was completely out of question for me at the time, after a few initial hiccups and hesitations, I decided to join a left-wing party as an activist.

What kind of party is that? Is it a political party?

Yes and no. I mean, it was a political party in the sense that all parties are 'political'. But this party did not support electoral politics or a parliamentary form of governance. It had more radical ambitions, aspiring for a systemic change in favour of a socialist state. As an activist, I was able to learn first-hand about the problems faced by the Indian labouring classes. Exposed to the labour movements in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab and Haryana, I got an opportunity to interact with a lot of veteran Marxist intellectuals and activists whose commitment really impressed me.

Still, I was equally cynical about the young Marxist activists with whom I met and worked. I found them very mechanical, to say the least. Every word of Marx made sense to me at that time, but the question of religion kept hovering in the background. I encountered various problems with the personalities of the leaders, cadres and with the organisational operations there, but I was particularly disappointed with the party's singular understanding of religion. The dominant understanding reflected that religion was the opium of the masses, and that we therefore had nothing to do with religion. I found this worldview very stifling. I was of the opinion that there were two sides to the same story, as religion could also be liberating. Historically speaking, it was a bit unfair to believe that religion exclusively served the interest of dominant groups. I thought we should engage with the religious, because religion is important for the people. This seemed particularly relevant, given the rise of Hindu and Islamic right-wing forces in India, which articulated a regressive and exclusivist reading of religion. Due to various personal and ideological conflicts, I eventually decided to leave the party, once again finding myself at the crossroads with no idea of how to move forward.

It was at this point that a friend put me in touch with someone else who wanted to start a school for children in a small rural town called Naugawan Sadat, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. I had lived exclusively in urban contexts and acquired little experience of rural India. A majority of the Indian population, about seventy percent, lives in rural areas. I thought this would provide me with a new experience and decided to help develop this proposed school.

The town of Naugawan had a big *bidi*[4] industry, whose labourers were very poor and exploited. Talking to them, I found out that they couldn't afford to pay the fees of good primary schools that were only available in Amroha, a district town about fifteen kilometres away. Hence, they were forced to send their children to a local government school that barely functioned. Moreover, these parents were keen that their children learn English, which would help them get established outside the village and find better jobs in bigger cities.

We worked hard to develop this school in Naugawan. After facing a lot of challenges, the school is now very reputed with a substantial student base. A large number of students have also joined good institutions in bigger cities, like Delhi, after receiving their early education in Naugawan. In this sense, the school has made a positive social impact.

The four years that I spent there were very personally instructive. Apart from the experiences and insights that I gained in the field of education and pedagogy, I was also able to experience rural India first-hand, learning about the way it functioned and the issues it faced. I discovered, for example, that caste identity took prevalence over religious identity in rural India. Almost all public policies were negotiated and translated through caste networks; 'politics' got things done. In contrast to the urban

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[4] *Bidi* is a kind of locally produced cigarette. It is made of a rolled *tendu* leaf containing tobacco.

middle class, the rural folk had a rather optimistic account of what politics had to offer. However, I eventually began to grow bored and thought I had nothing more to learn there. Since the school was doing well, I decided to move on.

It was then that one of my friends introduced me to Shahrukh Alam. Shahrukh had just returned to India after a short stint with Dr. Farid Esack, a progressive Muslim theologian based in South Africa. Shahrukh had worked in South Africa on Islamic liberation theology. When she first called me on phone, she explained her plans for Patna and said that she wanted to experiment with Islamic liberation theology in India.

This immediately struck a chord. I had already been thinking along those lines after reading texts by the Iranian revolutionary Ali Shariati. So when we finally met in Patna, at the close of 2005, Shahrukh and I engaged in much intellectual exchange, and I returned a week later to Naugawan very excited and inspired. I was really impressed with Shahrukh's ideas. Shahrukh introduced me to a whole new set of stimulating writings and concepts. After a few other conversations, we finally decided to start a collective in Patna. That took place in January 2006. If I recall correctly, the collective was then named *The Patna Collective* following the suggestion of our friend, Jason Keith Fernandes.

What kind of collective is the Patna Collective? Can you describe your initial objectives in founding it?

We worked within a framework of Islamic liberation theology, inspired in particular by the ideas of Farid Esack. We wanted to test these ideas within the Indian context and see how they could be employed here, if at all. In our view, there were two kinds of Islam. One was the 'Islam of the ruling class,' which was very hierarchical and thus not very egalitarian. There was also an 'Islam of the people,' which was liberating. Historically speaking, these two types of Islam have always been in a state of tension. We wanted to explore if an 'Islam of the people' existed within the Indian context. If it did not exist, we wanted to know if we could create a space for it.

What makes this 'Islam of the people' liberating?

In this version of Islam, religion is more than just an identity marker. It becomes a faith and a liberation theology. This faith addresses not only those who are born as Muslim, but encompasses all those who are marginalized, whether they are poor people, women, lower-castes or blacks. Islam then becomes a worldview which relates to anyone irrespective of his or her identity. The central focus shifts to socio-economic justice. We began by exploring whether there were elements of liberatory Islam in the Indian context. How could they be practised in the context of community work and social action? How could they be best articulated and placed into the foreground of the public sphere? We wanted to develop a discourse that would articulate religion from the vantage point of the marginalised in such a way that transcended circumstantially-bound identities. We wanted to ground religion in social realities.

The Journey with The Patna Collective

You call The Patna Collective a research-activist collective. What kind of activism did you undertake to reach the objectives you just mentioned?

When we started the Collective, we visited all the Sufi shrines in Patna. Sufi shrines are syncretistic spaces built on sites where revered Muslim saints were buried. People from almost all religious communities visit them. We started a dialogue with the communities living around these shrines. One particular shrine, the *Dargah Shah Arzan*, caught our attention. The interesting thing about this shrine was that there was a large slum community around it that included people from all religious backgrounds. Most of the men were labourers who made flutes or did bookbinding; the women were involved in a lot of domestic production. We conducted a survey of this area to gauge the type of relation between the shrine and the communities. We also tried to explore the consciousness of the people: their conception of identity, their self-perception, their relationship with the state and community leadership, and how they related to the shrine as such. A quantitative section of the survey registered data regarding their educational, economic and other social indices.

We shared the final report with the community and asked them how we could become involved in such a way that was helpful to them. We didn't want to impose any of our ideas onto the community. They responded by saying that their basic problem was livelihood. The local industries in which they worked were shrinking fast because of rapid automation. Manual binding no longer had a large market, and all the small factories were slowly closing down. There was also a problem with the flute

market. Flutes used to be exported to places like Mumbai for its big Bollywood industry. The digitalisation of music meant, however, that there was little demand for their flutes. Moreover, the transportation costs for the particular kind of bamboo used to manufacture the flutes had also increased exponentially. So most people remained unemployed for the major part of the year. This was the cause for a lot of social tensions. There were conflicts between various communities, conflicts in the domestic sphere, alcoholism, marital tensions – and all had an adverse impact on the youth. Due to insufficient income, children could not attend good schools. A strong drug trade had developed in the area, because jobless youth could make quick money by supplying drugs. Violence was prevalent, murders had increased and young student groups were fighting against each other. This was the context in which we had to work.

Though we understood what was happening, we wondered how we could become involved in a meaningful way. Our means and resources were limited, and the problems were really too large. We decided to start modestly. We developed a workers' collective for the bookbinders where they could manufacture stationery, copies and notebooks. Initially, three young bookbinders agreed to be a part of the collective. We called it *Shirkat*, which means 'participation.' We drew up a feasibility report and arranged the capital that was required for the first cycle of production. Within two or three months of production, however, it appeared that we were not competitive enough and that our costs were relatively higher than other players in the market. They possessed more capital than we did, and could procure raw materials in bulk, therefore benefiting from economies of scale. We were soon edged out of the market and didn't know what to do. Our livelihood project simply failed.

However, on another front, the members of *Shirkat* were making rapid progress. When we first met them, they were not very educated and could hardly read or write. Yet as a result of the interaction with us, they developed a taste for knowledge. After beginning to learn how to read and write, they were quickly studying and discussing world classics and texts by social reformers and leaders. They wanted to learn about society and how to make sense of what was going on. They wanted to discover how they could benefit their own community and make use of access to state resources. We provided whatever we could in terms of books and other resources, and developed a small library for their use. This was a largely unplanned consequence of the workers' collective, which had failed in its primary goal to create livelihood for the people.

The remarkable thing was that even after the failure to assist with livelihood, these members did not want to go back to their old situation. They really wanted to help other people in the community. They proposed to develop a small cultural centre to help young students and children with their studies in a creative manner. Children and young people who were witnessing violence everyday were given a small centre where they could play, watch movies, become involved in theatre and visit the library.

Hence, the *Shirkat Cultural Centre* was established by these members with the help of The Patna Collective. After school hours, young children from the community were helped with their homework in the centre library. Because the centre would supplement school, not replace it, we saw to it that every child in the community attended a common government school. But the centre also encouraged various creative activities like theatre, painting, singing, and debate.

We are very pleased with the outcome of this centre. The children are developing very well, and there is enthusiasm for the centre within the community. *Shirkat* has even experimented with a literacy programme for adult workers that runs in the late evenings following the work day. Despite some success stories, it was recently discontinued due to some factors beyond our control.

What is the difference between Shirkat and The Patna Collective? And what do you mean by research activism?

Though both work very closely with each other, there is also a distinction between their spheres of influence. While *Shirkat* largely works with the community and is led by the workers themselves, *The Patna Collective* has a middle-class component and mainly engages with research themes. Though the *Collective* largely supports *Shirkat*, there is no element of control in the relationship. We largely see the role of the *Collective* as a provider of the critical knowledge component. Despite the fact that we operate on separate spheres, we are able to reflect together on the experiences and problems of community work. The members of *Shirkat* have a rich, collective experiential knowledge.. Both our organisations have their strengths and weaknesses; this is really beyond our control. We like to frame the product of this collaborative work under the rubric 'research-activism.'
Can you elaborate a bit on that?

Well, let me be frank and suggest that any Civil Society Organisation (CSO) has a limited impact for change. One acts within larger economic and social forces which exceed our own control. The most that a CSO could do, in my view, is offer services which could be of some use for people, or to address specific instances of injustice. We do this when we support the *Shirkat Cultural Centre* or when members of *Shirkat* deal with issues like rape and alcoholism, or explain government schemes to the public.

But are we making a radical impact? In the life of a few persons, yes, but in terms of larger questions, I am afraid not. But what does one do when traditional answers for these larger questions cease to work? Critical engagement with the issues faced by the community is one answer. We may not have an instantaneous solution, but our understanding of the problems has gradually grown multilayered and nuanced, and I see that as a positive sign.

There is also a greater realisation that we need to work on two levels. Firstly, we need to work at the micro level with the community in order to maintain a connection with the people. Without that connection, we might lose sight of various aspects of their concrete experiences. Secondly, we also need to reflect on the broader movements that could help us understand larger social phenomena and address some of these issues in a better way. Many problems can only be resolved by larger social movements.

Of late, we have become interested in transformative politics and how this imbricates with Indian politics of identity. Because our own social identity is Muslim, it was slightly convenient for us to start with the problems and movements endemic to the Muslim identity. We are trying to make sense of the various movements within the Muslim community, like recent caste, class and gender movements. We are trying to understand how these movements address the issues of pluralism, globalisation, redistributive justice, identity, communalism and secularism in India. We realise that better visions of transformation cannot materialise out of thin air. We need to constantly document narratives, map and critically reflect on these new social movements, and disseminate our work for a wider dialogue. In other words, we need to create a new knowledge base that captures emerging social trends. We hope that, over a period of time, our body of knowledge can be instrumental in articulating more meaningful and effective conceptions of social transformation. We have not really departed from our initial concern with liberation theology. Our notions of 'liberation' and 'theology', however, have become more complex with each passing day. We are likely to develop an appropriate, faith-based vocabulary as the result of these kinds of engagement.

The Pasmanda Movement

To contribute to that aim, you are now studying the Pasmanda Movement? Why do you think it is interesting or important for The Patna Collective to study this particular movement?

Well, you know, in the past three decades or so, many new social movements have emerged in India that employ the categories of caste, gender, ecology and environment to mobilise people. These are new sites of social transformation which reframe democratic citizenship in interesting ways. Moreover, they also employ 'particularistic' arguments to challenge privileged structures of power which usually utilise a universalistic and modernist vocabulary. Among these movements, the mobilisation by lower castes,[5] called the 'dalit-bahujan' movement, has made a strong impact on the Indian polity.

The demographic composition of India is divided into a 'majority' Hindu population of around eighty percent and 'minorities' consisting of fourteen percent Muslims and remaining Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains. In general, Hindus are segmented into various castes. The *dalit-bahujan*

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[5] The caste system, as a system of social stratification, is basically premised on three essential features: (a) the principle of *hierarchy* in accordance with the elaborate rules of purity-pollution as registered and legitimized in the canonical religious texts; (b) endogamy, or restrictions on marriage outside one's caste; and (c) hereditary occupational specialization, otherwise known as the *varna vyavastha*, the fourfold division of Indian society into *varnas* or status groups: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (labourers). Apart from this, there is also a group of outcastes—the dalits — formerly known as untouchables. This summarises the relevant features of the caste system, also highlighting Brahmanical values as referential points. Overall, the caste value framework facilitates the monopolisation of knowledge, wealth and power by the higher castes.

movement of lower-caste Hindus, which constitute about seventy-five percent of the total Hindu population, protests against the privileged *savarna* Hindu castes.

Recently, however, it has become very clear that caste-like hierarchies have been a persistent feature in almost all minority religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism. Lower castes within these minorities have also started to challenge the hegemony of the powerful castes among them. The Pasmanda Movement, which is a movement of lower-caste *arzal* (dalit) and *ajlaf* (shudra) Muslims against the powerful *ashraf* (noble, upper-caste) Muslims, has become a very vocal and visible force.

Violence between religious communities, or 'communalism,' as it is often termed, has been a persistent feature of Indian political life. Causative factors within this context have been identified in the regimentation and monolithisation of religious identities. Why do these take place?

One has to appreciate that India, apart from being religious, is also a deeply caste-based and patriarchal society. All major religious identities are dominated by upper-caste males, who also happen to be a very small proportion of the Indian population. These upper-caste sections control most religious, state, business, industrial, media, and academic institutions, including even Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in India. But such unbridled power in a minority group, like that of the upper castes, is also cause for concern. The threat of lower caste or gender assertion always looms large. In a democratic context, with the provision of adult suffrage and regular elections, the majority of the lower castes always presents a realistic threat. These upper-caste sections resort, then, to conservative forms of religion as a method of social control. In order to tame internal rebellion from lower-ranking sections, they resort to communal violence. This is by and large the position of dalit-bahujan discourse on the question of religious communalism.

The Pasmanda discourse claims these religious cleavages to be fictitious and constructed in order to maintain the general domination of upper-caste men over lower castes and women. Even historically 'religious nationalism' and the construction of an all-India Hindu or Muslim community resulted from lower castes asserting themselves against the hegemony of upper castes. As late as at the end of the nineteenth century, one can find instances of Muslim and Hindu feudal landlords joining hands to crush Muslim and Hindu lower-caste peasant rebellions. In Pasmanda discourse, this transformation in the axis of struggle from 'caste' to 'religion' ultimately helped the advantaged castes to polarise the majority of lower-castes along religious lines. It also helped to veil the primary contradiction of Indian society, caste, which has a close correlation to 'class.'

In the Pasmanda historical reading, thus, this monolithisation of religious identities and consequent instances of communal violence aided in the preservation of upper-caste elite interests, irrespective of religion. It can be said, though, that the Hindu caste elite probably gains the most. A long history of lower-caste movements within the Hindu community have challenged this notion of a monolithic Hindu community. But due, for example, to the bracketing of Muslims as a minority and the persistent incidence of anti-Muslim riots, lower-caste movements among them have remained historically weak. The hegemony of the upper-caste, Muslim elite has only recently been challenged in the last decade with the initiation of the Pasmanda movement in Bihar. The movement aspires to forge caste solidarities, which exceed religious identities, and check the forces of communal violence. The movement's effectiveness is yet to be seen.

If communalism is a grave challenge to Indian pluralism, this justifies further study of the Pasmanda movement. A study could inform and challenge the discourse on Indian secularism and communalism in various, interesting ways. It would also deepen the Indian process of social justice and democratisation by reframing the question of citizenship and power. The movement, for example, has already influenced the debate around affirmative action. Furthermore, the movement would reconfigure the Muslim identity and highlight the question of social reform and religious interpretation. I mentioned earlier why advantaged castes were forced to resort to conservative interpretations of religion to consolidate their power. I speculate that such regressive interpretations of the Quran will be challenged by the ascendance of lower-castes in Muslim politics. The movement might engender internal reform within the community as an alternative to state-led, legislative reform often experienced as coercive and perturbing.

The Role of Interlocutor

So your research could contribute to the questions of pluralism, transformative politics and social reform in India with the three rubrics of communalism and secularism, Muslim identity and Islamic hermeneutics, as well with the deepening of the process toward democratisation. Recently you were appointed as a PhD candidate, through which you will also participate in the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme (PPKP). Could you say something about what motivates you to extend your work into doctoral research? Do you think this will differ from your role as research activist for The Patna Collective?

My prospective doctoral work and the work we do with The Patna Collective overlap each other in various ways. Both are similarly motivated by the crisis faced by existing models of transformative and emancipative Indian politics. That crisis has to be understood and explained in as clear a manner as possible, as to motivate activists to rethink their own enterprise and project.

Your research will be part of the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme. It explicitly calls itself a knowledge programme and not a research programme. In your function as PhD student, would you still call yourself a research activist? How will you distinguish yourself between the roles of research activist for The Patna Collective and researcher for your PhD work?

That is a meaningful question. During the process of my doctoral work, I will not become involved with activists and social movements in order to effect change or transformation, or to join in existing campaigns as an active agent of change. I would become involved, rather, to hear their stories and narratives, and to reflect on them.

My primary task, as I understand it now, would be to reflect and write on these themes, and to bring them to the public sphere for discussions and meaningful debates. I see my role as that of an interlocutor of these movements, rather than that of activist. However, having said that, I am aware that when you reflect on a situation, you also recreate it in many unforeseeable ways.

Could you elaborate a bit on your view on the difference between a knowledge programme and a research programme? Would your research fit into the programme of the pluralism knowledge programme?

Well, the primary difference that comes to mind is that a knowledge programme requires that one relates the products of research with some form of social action or activism. A regular research programme, however, might not require the same.

As I understand it, PPKP is anxious about the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in bringing about social transformation and addressing serious social issues in Third World locations. I think that is a legitimate concern. Most CSOs, at least in India, have employed a very modernist and universalist vocabulary for social interventions. Such notions of abstract citizenship, deliberative democracy and, shall I say, westernised notions of linear development, do not give serious recognition to the question of power and local structures. Rather, they prevent a better understanding of them, resulting in ineffective policies crafted from faulty vantage points. The existing CSO mindset is insufficiently aware of new sites of social transformation springing up in India. There is a need to stimulate new conversation about these issues.

I believe the PPKP will help us document, record and reflect on these new situations and bring them to the table for a broader consideration. If we are able to present a convincing case, we might also persuade existing CSOs to rethink their frames and strategies. But this is just a tentative thought. I am not really sure how our work will take shape. But I hope for the best.

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