



ISSN: 3135-3398 (Print)
EISSN: 3135-341X (Online)

Social Sciences & Humanities in Asia (SSHA)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.65098/ssha.02.2026.33.41>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Boundaries and Belonging: Hindu-Muslim Relationship in the Mixed Neighborhood in Meerut

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History:

Received 28 Dec 2025
Accepted 24 Apr 2026
Available online 30 Apr 2026

Online Article Code



ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Meerut, a historic city in western Uttar Pradesh, India, has long been a site of Hindu-Muslim coexistence marked by both harmony and conflict. This study examines the socio-cultural dynamics between Hindus and Muslims in mixed neighborhoods of Meerut, focusing on how identities are shaped, negotiated, and contested in everyday interactions.

Methods: Through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and secondary data, this research explores patterns of inter-communal interaction, spatial segregation, shared practices, and both visible and invisible boundaries that define belonging and exclusion in the community. The study also looks at how religious boundaries, while socially constructed, shift in response to political, economic, and social factors.

Results: The study finds that local factors, such as interdependence in trade, shared cultural practices, and collective memory, often mediate communal tensions. However, political polarization, media narratives, and state policies can trigger the disintegration of social trust. While religious boundaries are fluid, they become rigid during times of conflict or political upheaval, often reinforcing division.

Conclusion: This paper contributes to understanding urban neighborhoods as spaces where both boundary-making and bridge-building occur. It highlights the paradox of pluralism, how communities can coexist yet remain segregated. The findings have broader implications for urban policy, peace-building, and secular practices in contemporary India.

KEYWORDS

Communal Relations, Urban Ethnography, Hindu-Muslim Dynamics, Boundary-making, Belonging, Meerut, Interfaith Coexistence

1. INTRODUCTION

The city of Meerut, located in western Uttar Pradesh, has historically been a melting pot of religions, languages, and cultural exchanges. With nearly equal representation of Hindus and Muslims, the city offers a fertile ground for examining the intricacies of inter-religious relationships. From the anti-colonial revolts of 1857 to the communal riots of the 1980s and 2013 Muzaffarnagar spillovers, Meerut has been a site of both collaboration and conflict between its Hindu and Muslim residents.

Understanding the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim relationships in mixed neighborhoods requires moving beyond sensationalist narratives and political binaries. Scholars like Ashutosh Varshney (2002) have argued that civic engagement and everyday interactions can reduce communal tensions. Similarly, Gyanendra Pandey (1990) and Paul Brass (2003) have emphasized the constructed nature of communal identities and violence. In this context, Meerut becomes more than a geographical site, it becomes a lens through which to understand how belonging is imagined, negotiated, and threatened in modern India.

This research aims to explore the lived realities of residents in mixed

colonies, such as Lisari Gate, Hapur Road, and Brahmpuri, among others. How do people navigate shared spaces such as markets, schools, festivals, and mosques/temples? What role do local politics, class, and gender play in shaping these relationships? How are boundaries created—through language, space, memory, or fear? And most importantly, what practices sustain coexistence amidst underlying tensions?

Using qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and review of urban planning documents and media discourse, this paper analyzes the dual processes of boundary-making and bridge-building. The objective is to not only document conflict but also understand the nuanced ways in which harmony is maintained.

By focusing on micro-level social practices rather than macro-level political rhetoric, the study contributes to the field of urban sociology, conflict studies, and interfaith relations. It challenges the idea that religious communities in India are inherently antagonistic and instead reveals a complex tapestry of mutual dependence, suspicion, resilience, and adaptation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Understanding Identity and Boundaries

The concepts of identity and boundary-making are central to understanding inter-communal dynamics in diverse societies. Fredrik Barth's seminal work challenged the static notion of identity and emphasized the significance of boundaries in shaping ethnic relations. According to Barth, what defines a group is not the cultural content per se, but the boundaries drawn between "us" and "them." In the context of Hindu-Muslim relations in India, boundaries are not merely religious but intersect with class, caste, gender, and spatial arrangements (Barth, 1969).

Nira Yuval-Davis further expanded the discourse on belonging by identifying three interlinked facets: social location, identification and emotional attachment, and ethical and political values. Therefore, belonging is not only about who we are but where we are allowed to be. This theoretical framework helps decode why shared urban spaces like Meerut are simultaneously marked by both intimate coexistence and sharp exclusions (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

2.2 Hindu-Muslim Relations in India: A Historical Overview

The historical trajectory of Hindu-Muslim relations in India was neither linear nor uniform. From the syncretism of Bhakti-Sufi traditions to the partition of India in 1947, the relationship evolved through cooperation and confrontation. Gyanendra Pandey argued that communal identities were sharpened during colonial rule through administrative categorization and the use of the census. Communal violence was not an expression of deep-seated animosities but a product of political processes (Pandey, 1990).

Paul Brass (2003) explained how communal violence was organized through institutionalized riot systems involving local politicians, police, and the media. The theory of institutionalized riot system is particularly relevant for cities like Meerut, which have witnessed periodic eruptions of violence that follow identifiable patterns (Brass, 2003).

Ashutosh Varshney's (2002) provided a hopeful counter-narrative. Studying cities like Aligarh and Calicut, Varshney found that cities with strong intercommunal civic networks were more resilient to communal violence. Emphasis on everyday civic ties, such as trade associations, cultural groups, and informal neighborhood friendships, offered a pathway to peace (Varshney, 2022).

2.3 Urban Communalism and Spatial Politics

Urban geography plays a significant role in either aggravating or mitigating communal divisions. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Srivastava have highlighted how urban segregation, either voluntary or enforced, produces physical and psychological boundaries. Ghettoization of Muslim communities, often justified under the logic of safety or "cultural comfort," further isolates them from the mainstream economy and education system (Jaffrelot, 1996; Srivastava, 2005).

In *City Requiem*, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty, Ananya Roy shows how urban spaces are gendered and communally coded, producing layered exclusions. Similar trends are observable in Meerut, where Muslim-dominated areas like Lisari Gate are stigmatized as "sensitive zones" and under-policed yet over-surveilled (Roy, 2003).

Mass media and real estate practices also reinforce spatial boundaries. Zoya Hasan and Mushirul Hasan, in *Communalism in India*, document how housing discrimination against Muslims persists despite constitutional safeguards. In many urban centres, Muslims are denied rental or ownership opportunities in Hindu-majority areas, reinforcing the cycle of suspicion and distance (Hasan & Hasan, 2002).

2.4 Everyday Coexistence and Cultural Intimacy

While conflict dominates headlines, the everyday lives of people in mixed neighborhoods often reveal moments of shared humanity. Veena Das's concept of "life as usual" during and after violence shows how ordinary people continue to create relationships across religious lines in 1995, even amidst trauma. Festivals, food habits, language, and trade

offer daily interactions that humanize the other (Das, 1995).

Amrita Basu and Ravinder Kaur have also shown how women often become agents of peace-building in families and communities. Their roles as mothers, neighbors, and caregivers create informal networks of support that transcend formal religious divisions. Youth, too, play a dual role, either as mobilizers of identity politics or as bridges through social media, sports, and education (Basu, 2002; Kaur, 2007).

Rakesh Sharma's documentary *Final Solution* in 2003, though focused on Gujarat, offers valuable insights into how stereotypes are normalized and how narratives of fear and belonging are socially reproduced. These insights resonate in Meerut, where school textbooks, WhatsApp forwards, and community rumors often shape the worldview of young residents (Sharma, 2003).

2.5 Gaps in Existing Literature

While the literature on communal relations in India is extensive, several gaps persist. First, there is a lack of localized, micro-ethnographic work focused specifically on cities like Meerut. Much of the academic attention has been concentrated on larger urban centres or on major communal flashpoints like Ayodhya or Gujarat. Meerut, with its history of tension, resilience, and mixed demographics, offers unique insights that remain underexplored. Second, there is insufficient focus on how class, gender, and caste interact with religious identity in urban neighborhoods. Most studies treat religious communities as monolithic units, thereby ignoring intra-group diversity and intersections. Third, the role of informal mechanisms, such as mohalla committees, interfaith marriages, neighborhood panchayats, and local business partnerships, needs greater scholarly attention. These actors often mediate tensions before they escalate and play a crucial role in sustaining peace.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach rooted in urban ethnography to explore how Hindu-Muslim relationships are formed, challenged, and negotiated in the mixed neighborhoods of Meerut. The focus is on lived experiences, local perceptions, and spatial practices that illuminate the micro-politics of coexistence and exclusion.

Ethnographic inquiry is particularly suited to unpacking the subtle boundaries and overlapping spaces of belonging in urban India. As Clifford Geertz argued, the goal of ethnography is not merely to describe actions but to interpret the "webs of meaning" in which people are suspended. This study thus privileges the voices of ordinary residents over abstract communal categories.

The methodology combines fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, mapping, and media analysis to create a multi-layered understanding of communal relations in Meerut. It blends anthropological sensitivity with sociological analysis and policy relevance (Geertz, 1973).

3.2 Site Selection

The research was conducted across four mixed neighborhoods in Meerut:

- Lisari Gate—A densely populated Muslim-majority area with adjacent Hindu communities. Known for trade, political activism, and periodic communal tensions.
- Brahmपुरi—A more middle-class, residential area where religious boundaries are less rigid, though segregation is increasing.
- Abu Lane and Sadar Bazar—Old market areas with long-standing Hindu-Muslim coexistence in trade and business.
- Shastri Nagar Extension and Partapur Bypass—Emerging middle-income colonies witnessing new patterns of inter-religious interaction due to real estate expansion.

These sites were chosen purposively to capture diversity in class, occupation, religious composition, and urban morphology. They offer

contrasts between older traditional neighborhoods and newly forming settlements that reflect contemporary communal patterns.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 46 interviews were conducted between December 2024 and March 2025 with residents, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, religious leaders, peace activists, and local government officials. Interviews were conducted in Hindi and Urdu, lasting between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. Key questions revolved around: interactions with neighbors of different faiths; perceptions of communal harmony or tension; narratives of trust, suspicion, or fear; role of politics, police, and media in shaping relationships; and experiences during festivals, riots, and elections. Verbatim quotes were transcribed and translated, with care taken to preserve context and emotional nuance.

3.3.2 Participant Observation

The researcher participated in everyday neighborhood activities such as shopping, attending Friday and Sunday prayers at local mosques and temples, visiting schools, attending mohalla committee meetings, and observing communal festivals (e.g., Holi, Eid, Diwali, and Muharram).

This immersive approach enabled the researcher to document embodied practices of coexistence, such as shared greetings, food exchanges, boundary crossing, and moments of tension, such as avoidance, spatial demarcation, or silence.

3.3.3 Media and Document Analysis

Local newspapers (e.g., Dainik Jagran, Amar Ujala, and Hindustan), municipal records, real estate advertisements, and police reports from 2013 to 2024 were analyzed to understand the discursive construction of communal boundaries. WhatsApp forwards, wall graffiti, and Facebook community posts were also collected for understanding digital influences on neighborhood relations.

3.3.4 Spatial Mapping

Using hand-drawn maps and GPS plotting, the researcher documented religious landmarks, educational institutions, markets, and invisible borders, such as "neutral" shops where both communities buy, or parks frequented by one group. This helped visualize spatial segregation and zones of interaction.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the topic, strong ethical safeguards were observed:

- All participants provided informed consent, either written or verbal, with the option to withdraw at any time.
- Pseudonyms were used to protect identities.
- Interviews involving trauma or riot-related memories were approached with empathy and care, and no leading questions were posed.
- The study adhered to the AAA Code of Ethics and guidelines by the Indian Sociological Society for fieldwork.

In cases where youth or women felt unsafe speaking in public, interviews were conducted in trusted spaces, such as homes, anganwadis, or school corridors, and often in the presence of a known neighbor or guardian.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

While rich in qualitative depth, the study has several limitations:

- The sample size is small and not statistically representative of all of Meerut.
- Access was difficult in some areas deemed "sensitive," leading to underrepresentation of certain voices.
- Gender dynamics played a role in access: Muslim women, in particular, were more cautious and often restricted by their families from open interviews.

- Due to safety concerns, audio recordings were avoided in some interviews, relying on hand-written notes.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had residual effects on school and community functions, affecting observational opportunities.

Nevertheless, the qualitative approach provides deep insight into the social fabrics and fault lines that shape Hindu-Muslim interactions in everyday life.

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MEERUT: COEXISTENCE, CONFLICT, AND COLONIAL LEGACIES

4.1 Early Encounters and Medieval Harmony

The history of Meerut reflects the broader currents of Indo-Islamic interaction that began as early as the 11th century. Initially a key town under Hindu dynasties, Meerut came under the control of Muslim rulers during the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire. Rather than a narrative of conquest and rupture, the city's development through these centuries points to gradual integration and urban coexistence.

Meerut's medieval landscape bore the imprint of both Hindu and Muslim cultural traditions. Mosques, temples, tombs, and madrasas coexisted in the urban fabric, and the Perso-Arabic influence enriched local language, poetry, food, and architectural styles. The Sufi-Bhakti syncretism that spread across North India found expression in the devotional culture of the region, often blurring religious distinctions in practice.

The coexistence of faiths in this period was functional as well as spiritual; Hindus and Muslims frequently engaged in trade, landholding, artisanal production, and administrative roles. While political power lay with Muslim elites for much of this era, social life in the city reflected a shared urban ethos.

4.2 Colonial Transformation and the Seeds of Communalization

The colonial era marked a profound shift in the social and political fabric of Meerut. Under British rule, identities began to harden along religious lines. This was not an organic development but a result of deliberate colonial policies of enumeration, categorization, and division.

The 1857 Rebellion, often dubbed India's first war of independence, began in Meerut. The uprising, which brought together Hindu sepoys and Muslim cavalry, symbolized a brief moment of unified resistance to colonial oppression. However, the brutal suppression of the revolt by the British and the subsequent tightening of control laid the groundwork for religious polarization.

Census classifications, separate electorates, and religiously framed legal codes (e.g., personal laws) all contributed to the construction of communal identities. As Gyanendra Pandey argues, communalism in India was not the natural outcome of religious diversity but the result of modern political processes introduced during colonial rule (Pandey, 1990).

The colonial urban model also contributed to spatial segregation. New cantonments and civil lines created exclusive zones for British officers, while native populations were often pushed into older, congested quarters. This created a socio-spatial hierarchy that sometimes mapped onto religious divisions, a pattern that persists in contemporary Meerut.

4.3 Partition, Migration, and Resettlement

Although Meerut did not witness mass violence during the Partition of 1947, compared to Punjab or Bengal, it was deeply affected by the trauma of migration. A significant number of Muslims left for Pakistan, while Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan settled in parts of the city. This demographic reshuffling altered the urban balance and deepened the communal psyche.

The memory of Partition continues to be a latent force in inter-religious relations in Meerut. In interviews, many older residents recalled stories of loss, displacement, and fractured friendships. Such memories are transmitted through family narratives and have shaped perceptions of

trust and fear across generations.

The post-partition decades saw a rise in Hindu nationalist rhetoric, especially from the 1980s onwards. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 resonated strongly in western Uttar Pradesh, including Meerut, leading to a series of violent episodes.

4.4 The 1987 Hashimpura and Maliana Massacres

Meerut's most catastrophic communal violence occurred in 1987. Following tensions over the Ram Shila processions and Muslim protests, a large-scale riot broke out. In the notorious Hashimpura massacre, members of the Provincial Armed Constabulary rounded up over 40 Muslim men, took them in trucks, and executed them near Ghaziabad (Brass, 2003).

In nearby Maliana, around 70 Muslims were killed, allegedly with police collusion. These incidents are remembered as state-enabled massacres and symbolize the erosion of Muslim faith in law enforcement and justice systems. Investigations were slow, and convictions were delayed by decades, reinforcing a sense of alienation and legal betrayal among Muslim residents.

The riots also led to further ghettoization, with many Muslims relocating to more homogenous areas for safety. The long-term consequence was the decline of truly mixed neighborhoods and the rise of invisible "no-go zones" for both communities.

4.5 Communal Riots and Political Polarization Post-2000

Meerut has remained a flashpoint for communal tensions in the 21st century. Minor clashes over religious processions, cow slaughter rumours, or interfaith marriages have escalated quickly, often amplified by WhatsApp forwards and media sensationalism.

The rise of Hindutva organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, coupled with political mobilization around religious identity, has sharpened communal divides. Meanwhile, sections of the Muslim community have become increasingly politically conscious but also marginalized from the urban development narrative.

The Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013, though occurring 80 kilometers from Meerut, had spillover effects. Many displaced Muslim families resettled in areas like Lisari Gate and Brahmpuri, altering demographic balances and intensifying perceptions of encroachment among Hindu residents.

Local elections, school textbooks, and policing patterns often reinforce religious othering. Yet, Meerut has also witnessed grassroots efforts at peacebuilding, especially through interfaith dialogue groups and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) initiatives.

4.6 Continuities and Changes

While the historical trajectory of Meerut shows periodic eruptions of violence, it also reveals deep currents of interdependence. In interviews conducted for this study, many residents emphasized how markets, marriages (in rare interfaith cases), friendships, and festivals continue to bring people together.

Urban development, education, and digital access are reshaping communal relations, but not always in predictable ways. Middle-class aspirations often promote coexistence, while economic precarity can become a trigger for competition and resentment.

5. COEXISTENCE AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN MIXED NEIGHBORHOODS OF MEERUT

While riots, tensions, and political polarization dominate the public discourse around Hindu-Muslim relations in India, the daily lives of people in mixed neighborhoods like those in Meerut tell a more layered story. Contrary to the assumption that Hindus and Muslims live in mutual isolation or hostility, many urban neighborhoods reflect what anthropologist Veena Das describes as a "life that goes on," where everyday coexistence endures even in the shadow of structural violence

and historical trauma (Das, 2007).

This section examines how Hindus and Muslims in Meerut negotiate shared spaces, form relationships, observe boundaries, and create informal networks of trust. Drawing from ethnographic observations and interviews, it explores the themes of shared festivals, economic interdependence, cultural hybridity, gender roles, youth interactions, and the subtle mechanisms that sustain pluralism amid anxiety.

5.1 Shared Rituals and Religious Pluralism

In mixed colonies like Brahmpuri and Abu Lane, both Hindus and Muslims frequently participate in each other's festivals—not necessarily as co-devotees, but as neighbors and friends. During Eid, many Hindu households receive sevaiyan and biryani from their Muslim neighbors, while Muslim children look forward to sweets and crackers during Diwali. Some interviewees recalled how Hindu families in the 1990s would help Muslims decorate tazias for Muharram, and Muslims would assist in organizing Holi events.

This ritual sharing is not universal nor devoid of tension—it often varies across class and generation. Older residents expressed nostalgia for a more integrated social life, while younger generations, exposed to polarizing online narratives, expressed more caution. Yet, symbolic gestures, such as greeting each other on religious days, attending funerals, or joining each other's weddings, remain widespread in many areas.

Such moments reveal what Sudhir Kakar termed "intimate enemies": a relationship defined by simultaneous familiarity and fear, trust and tension. Religious pluralism in Meerut is thus not an abstract ideal but a negotiated practice, shaped by geography, class, and lived history (Kakar, 1996).

5.2 Economic Interdependence and Informal Collaboration

Markets serve as critical zones of contact and cooperation. In Abu Lane and Sadar Bazaar, Hindu and Muslim traders often operate adjacent stalls, share tea, exchange customer referrals, and even lend each other small sums during lean periods. One shopkeeper, a Hindu confectioner in his 50s, noted: "Yeh danga-police sab upar wale logon ka hai. Yahan sab ka kaam ek doosre par tikka hua hai." All this riot and police business is for the people at the top. Here, everyone's livelihood depends on each other (Field interview, Sadar Bazaar trader, 2025).

In several cases, joint ventures between Hindu and Muslim partners were found, ranging from meat processing units to garment trading. While formal contracts were rare, informal trust networks and decades-old relationships sustained these economic ties. These everyday economic collaborations often form a buffer against polarization, enabling people to humanize the other beyond religious identity.

However, economic cooperation can also be fragile. Post-riot periods often witness disruption of supply chains, breakdown of trust, and boycott campaigns. In the aftermath of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, several Hindu wholesalers began sourcing goods from non-Muslim intermediaries, fearing reputational or political consequences. These shifts demonstrate how economic coexistence can be both resilient and vulnerable.

5.3 Language, Food, and Cultural Hybridity

Language in Meerut's mixed localities is a hybrid of Hindi, Urdu, and regional dialects, often infused with Persian vocabulary and local slang. Children from both communities commonly use phrases like *khairiyat*, *bhai jaan*, or *pranaam* with equal comfort. While madrasa education fosters Urdu literacy among Muslim children, many Hindu youths also grow up understanding Urdu couplets from Bollywood or *qawwalis* heard in local shrines.

Food is another arena of both sharing and boundaries. While Muslims may refrain from food touched by Hindus during fasts, and vice versa, the general dining culture is one of mutual adaptation. Many Hindu residents expressed a fondness for kebabs and haleem, while Muslim

children are familiar with *aloo-poori* or *halwa* served at Hindu temples during community feasts.

Such cultural hybridity complicates the binary narratives of communal division. It shows that daily life in Meerut is lived in shared sensory and linguistic worlds, even as identities remain marked and occasionally contested.

5.4 Gendered Spaces of Interaction

Women's roles in sustaining communal harmony often go unrecognised, yet they are central to neighborhood dynamics. In Brahmpuri, women from both communities reported exchanging recipes, visiting each other during childbirth, and jointly managing children's school activities. One Muslim woman noted, "Hamare mohalle mein chhoti-moti baatein hoti hain, par auratein zyada samjhdaar hoti hain. Hum samjha leti hain gharwalon ko." There are small issues in our neighborhood, but women are wiser. We often calm our families down (Interview with female resident, Brahmpuri colony, 2025).

Anganwadis and local clinics are spaces where women meet across religious boundaries, forging bonds that outlast political provocations. These networks can act as early warning systems. When women sense rising tension, they often alert others to avoid escalation. Despite being excluded from formal peace committees or political leadership, women act as *de facto* mediators in many households.

However, gender also marks vulnerability. During communal tensions, women's bodies often become symbolic sites of honor and humiliation, making interfaith friendships riskier. Young women reported being restricted from venturing into neighborhoods of the other community, especially after incidents of violence or rumors of love jihad.

5.5 Youth, Media, and Aspirations

Youth in Meerut's mixed localities are caught between two forces: globalized aspirations and localized polarizations. On one hand, schools, cricket matches, tuition centers, and WhatsApp groups create platforms for interfaith friendship and shared ambitions. On the other hand, politicized narratives, especially through digital media, expose youth to stereotypes, conspiracy theories, and communal memes.

Boys from both communities reported playing sports together, especially cricket and football. Several youth groups organize blood donation camps and social drives during Ramzan or Navratri, creating informal coalitions. Yet, online spaces remain divisive. Facebook pages and local YouTube channels often post communal content, leading to virtual arguments that spill into real-life hostility.

There is also a class divide. Middle-class youth in emerging colonies such as Partapur Bypass reported greater interaction and mutual respect, while working-class youth in congested localities expressed more suspicion. Many young respondents noted that their "Muslim friends" or "Hindu friends" were the exception, not the rule, highlighting the rarity of sustained cross-community intimacy.

5.6 Local Governance, Schools, and Civic Life

Local institutions such as schools, Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs), and mohalla committees play a key role in managing intercommunal relations. In mixed public schools, children from both communities study together, sing the national anthem, and participate in Independence Day celebrations. Teachers often act as informal peacekeepers.

Yet, education can be both a bridge and a barrier. Several Muslim families reported discrimination in private schools or hesitation in enrolling daughters due to cultural norms. School textbooks, especially those influenced by state politics, sometimes carry religious bias or historical omissions, reinforcing stereotypes.

Ward councillors and police officials also shape neighborhood dynamics. In colonies with active councillors from both communities, residents reported better grievance redressal and more confidence in law

enforcement. Conversely, in "sensitive" zones like Lisari Gate, police presence was perceived as suspicious rather than protective, especially among Muslims.

5.7 The Tension Between Coexistence and Segregation

Despite many zones of interaction, spatial and psychological boundaries persist. Some streets become informal borders, with residents avoiding "crossing over" after dark. Parents discourage children from visiting the homes of friends from the other community. Interfaith romantic relationships are rare and heavily stigmatized. Several Hindu respondents admitted they would hesitate to rent a house to a Muslim tenant, even if friendly.

Yet, this does not amount to complete isolation. The relationship is better understood as a spectrum, ranging from close friendship to functional cooperation to passive avoidance. The underlying dynamic is one of mutual dependence laced with historical mistrust—a paradox that defines everyday coexistence in cities like Meerut.

6. CONFLICT AND BOUNDARY-MAKING IN MEERUT'S MIXED NEIGHBORHOODS

While coexistence in Meerut's mixed colonies reflects everyday resilience and mutual dependency, it is periodically disrupted by violence, rumors, and systemic exclusions. This section explores the processes through which boundaries (physical, psychological, and political) are drawn and reinforced between Hindu and Muslim communities. It focuses on spatial segregation, the role of state and media, political narratives, memory of violence, and how these factors shape urban communal relations.

6.1 Spatial Segregation and Symbolic Geography

One of the most striking features of communal division in Meerut is the geographical reordering of space. Neighborhoods like Lisari Gate, Zakir Colony, and Faiz-e-Aam are widely perceived as Muslim areas, while Shastri Nagar, Jagriti Vihar, and Ganga Nagar are identified as "Hindu strongholds." These designations are not formal but have a powerful impact on mobility, property access, and social interaction.

The symbolic geography of Meerut is sustained through visible markers, mosques and temples, graffiti, political flags, saffron or green color-coded banners, and through invisible cues such as language accents, dress styles, or names on nameplates. This "semiotic landscape" signals to outsiders whether they are welcome or not (Srivastava, 2025).

In many interviews, residents admitted to avoiding movement into areas dominated by the other community, particularly during festivals or political rallies. One Hindu rickshaw driver said: "Lisari Gate se agar phone pe baat karta hoon, log turant samajh jaate hain ki Muslim area se hoon. Wahan jaane se hi kuch log darte hain." If I speak on the phone from Lisari Gate, people immediately recognize it as a Muslim area. Some people are afraid to even go there. (Interview with Hindu rickshaw driver, Lisari Gate, 2025).

These spatial divisions are reinforced through real estate practices. Muslim families often face difficulty renting or buying homes in Hindu-majority colonies. Brokers avoid showing properties across communal lines, fearing backlash. Such *de facto* ghettoization isolates communities socially and economically, making coexistence fragile.

6.2 State Surveillance and Policing Bias

Residents from Muslim-majority areas reported excessive surveillance and under-policing during conflict. During Muharram or Friday prayers, large police deployments are visible in Lisari Gate and similar areas. While some view this as preventive, many Muslims perceive it as the criminalization of religious practice.

In contrast, residents of Hindu-majority areas noted delayed police response during interfaith altercations. Several instances were cited where police arrived only after damage was done. This asymmetrical policing fosters mistrust and confirms the belief among Muslims that the state apparatus is not neutral.

The 1987 Hashimpura massacre remains a central reference point in this discourse. Even decades later, many Muslim youths mentioned the event not through personal memory but through inherited trauma. The slow delivery of justice in the case, convictions came only in 2018, symbolizes the failure of institutional accountability in the eyes of the community (Sethi, 2017).

Women from both communities recounted instances of police harassment during searches or curfews. Muslim women particularly noted the fear of male officers entering homes without female accompaniment, further reinforcing a gendered dimension of surveillance.

6.3 Media Narratives and Digital Polarization

Local and national media play a crucial role in constructing communal perceptions. Several interviewees from both communities highlighted how TV news channels frame Muslims as “anti-national,” “illegal,” or “dangerous.” In times of conflict, the disproportionate focus on Muslim youth as alleged perpetrators contributes to widespread stereotyping.

WhatsApp and Facebook have become major platforms for rumor-mongering and hate circulation. From allegations of “love jihad” to false videos of cow slaughter, digital misinformation has triggered tensions in Meerut multiple times. In 2022, a viral video falsely showing a Muslim boy slapping a Hindu girl in a school led to a protest march by right-wing groups, even though police later confirmed the video was edited.

Youth groups shared that they frequently exit digital spaces due to communal toxicity. Muslim youth said they often use fake names on gaming or job platforms to avoid discrimination. This digital silencing mirrors the real-world anxieties they experience. Independent fact-checking or digital literacy initiatives remain largely absent, allowing communal narratives to flourish unchecked.

6.4 Political Mobilization and Electoral Polarization

Politics in Meerut is deeply communalized. Political parties, particularly during elections, often appeal to religious identities over developmental agendas. Slogans such as “Ab ki baar Hindu sarkar” or “Muslim vote bank” are normalized in political rallies.

BJP’s rise in western Uttar Pradesh has coincided with the marginalization of Muslim representation in local bodies. Muslim candidates from secular parties are often dismissed as “vote cutters,” while those contesting independently are branded as “communal.”

Interviews with Muslim residents revealed disillusionment with democratic representation. Many said they vote to prevent majoritarian parties from winning rather than out of hope for genuine change. Hindu residents, particularly upper-caste men, often expressed anxiety about demographic shifts, suggesting Muslims were “overtaking” Hindus through higher birth rates, a narrative rooted more in myth than data (Jaffrelot, 2007).

This political othering is reflected in development patterns. Muslim-majority areas are visibly underdeveloped, and roads are narrower, sanitation is poor, and schools are fewer. Some refer to Lisari Gate as a “mini-Pakistan,” a label that stigmatizes the locality and restricts its access to urban planning resources.

6.5 The Role of Violence, Rumor, and Memory

Meerut’s communal landscape is haunted by recurring cycles of violence, often sparked by rumor or minor altercations. A broken temple bell, a mosque’s loudspeaker, or a Hindu boy-Muslim girl friendship has often been enough to ignite mobs.

People carry these memories in their collective consciousness. A Hindu woman recounted: “1987 mein humare gali mein ek Muslim dukan jala diya gaya tha. Uske baad se maine kabhi kisi Muslim ko trust nahi kiya”. In 1987, a Muslim shop was burnt in our lane. Since then, I’ve never trusted any Muslim (Interview with Hindu woman resident, 2025).

In contrast, Muslim youth cite events like the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots

or anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests as turning points. For many, these were moments of identity assertion as well as social alienation.

Trauma travels across generations. Young children recall being warned by parents not to play near “the other side.” Some schools reportedly segregate students during religious festivals or ask Muslim girls to avoid wearing hijabs, subtle signs of institutionalized bias.

6.6 Boundary-Making through Education, Dress, and Language

Boundaries are not only spatial or political, but they are also performed daily through dress, language, and cultural codes. Muslim youth who wear skullcaps or sport beards report being followed in malls or suspected of theft. Hindu girls wearing bindis are sometimes asked to avoid Muslim-dominated markets.

Language, too, becomes a marker. A soft-spoken Urdu accent may be mocked as Pakistani. Likewise, overt use of Sanskritized Hindi is perceived as a political statement. These small acts accumulate to form everyday walls unseen but deeply felt.

Educational institutions, especially private schools, often subtly exclude Muslim narratives from curricula. Some parents shared that textbooks underplay Mughal contributions or overemphasize Hindu glory. This contributes to symbolic erasure, affecting how Muslim children view their place in national history.

6.7 Resistance, Dialogue, and Local Mechanisms

Despite this bleak landscape, there are instances of resistance to boundary-making. In Brahmpuri, a group of Hindu and Muslim women started a collective tailoring unit that serves both communities. In Sadar Bazar, youth formed an interfaith cricket team and organized a “Unity Cup” tournament every Republic Day.

Several mohalla committees act as informal dispute resolution bodies. They often intervene before police get involved, especially in cases of interfaith tension. While not always effective, their presence suggests alternative structures of negotiation still survive.

Religious leaders, especially moderate clerics and temple priests, sometimes issue joint statements calling for peace. However, their influence is often limited in the face of media sensationalism and political polarization.

6.8 Spaces of Negotiation and Belonging

In a city often framed by its fault lines of religion and riots, Meerut’s everyday social life also brims with quiet negotiations, shared aspirations, and evolving notions of belonging. These dynamics do not negate the reality of conflict or division, but they complicate the binary narrative of communal antagonism. This section explores the interstitial spaces, such as emotional, spatial, and institutional, where Hindu and Muslim residents co-create a sense of urban belonging in mixed neighborhoods. It focuses on shared public spaces, interfaith networks, evolving civic identities, and the resilience of local solidarities.

7. SHARED PUBLIC SPACES AS ZONES OF ENCOUNTER

Despite rising segregation, several shared public spaces remain crucial to everyday coexistence. Public parks, government hospitals, railway stations, and markets act as contact zones, where both communities participate in routines that temporarily suspend religious identities.

For example, in the Subharti Hospital compound, one of the largest health facilities in the region, patients from both communities sit side by side, sharing benches, medicines, and anxieties. In Gandhi Park, children of Hindu and Muslim backgrounds play cricket or ride bicycles together, supervised by elders who may otherwise rarely interact in formal settings.

In these spaces, proximity does not always translate into intimacy, but it facilitates civility and coexistence as one Hindu teacher remarked: “Ham alag rehte hain, par ek hi hawa mein saans lete hain.” We live separately,

but breathe the same air (Interview with Hindu schoolteacher, Abu Lane, 2025).

The durability of these shared spaces becomes particularly evident in times of crisis, natural disasters, health emergencies, or civic failures, when community members extend support across religious lines. During the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple interfaith initiatives emerged in Meerut, with youth delivering oxygen cylinders and medicines without regard for religious affiliation.

7.1 Interfaith Friendships and Local Solidarity

Beneath the tensions, interpersonal friendships and micro-solidarities thrive. These are not grand alliances or ideological commitments but day-to-day acts of trust: a Muslim shopkeeper safeguarding a Hindu neighbor's parcel; a Hindu tailor making a bridal dress for a Muslim girl's nikah; children exchanging prasad and sevaiyan during festivals.

These friendships form what Ashutosh Varshney describes as "everyday forms of civic engagement," which serve as informal shock absorbers during times of communal strain (Varshney, 2002). Such ties were evident in areas like Brahmपुरi, where residents recounted how neighborhood elders, both Hindu and Muslim, prevented mob entry during the 2013 Muzaffarnagar spillover violence.

These solidarities are often informal and localized. They may not reflect broad social harmony, but they reflect contextual coexistence, a logic of "we may disagree on big things, but we live together here."

7.2 Evolving Civic and Urban Identities

Belonging in urban India today is increasingly shaped by civic participation and access to state resources, rather than religious identity alone. In interviews with middle-class residents in Shastrī Nagar and Abu Lane, both Hindus and Muslims expressed dissatisfaction not with each other, but with inadequate sanitation, water supply, and electricity.

One Muslim engineer in Partapur noted: "Mere liye sabse bada masla yeh nahi hai ki mai Muslim hoon, balki yeh hai ki mere area mein na nal hai na road. Agar Nagar Nigam Hindu-Muslim nahi dekhe, toh hum bhi nahi dekhen." The biggest issue is not that I am Muslim, but that there is no water or road in my area. If the municipality stops seeing Hindu-Muslim, so will we (Interview with Muslim engineer, Partapur Bypass, 2025).

This shift from religious to civic identity is not uniform, but it is gaining strength among educated youth and aspirational families. RWAs, school parent-teacher meetings, and government feedback platforms act as new arenas for participation, where religion recedes, and urban citizenship emerges.

7.3 Youth as Agents of Negotiation

Youth, especially in mixed localities, often navigate the duality of digital communalism and offline pluralism. While WhatsApp groups may circulate communal hate, the same youth may collaborate in tuition centers, sports clubs, or campus elections. Their lives oscillate between suspicion and solidarity.

Several youth groups in Meerut have launched interfaith social campaigns, such as blood donation drives during Ramzan or cleanliness campaigns during Ganesh Chaturthi. These initiatives not only create platforms for collaboration but also redefine what it means to be a Hindu or Muslim in urban India—not just a religious label, but an active citizen with shared goals.

Moreover, interfaith friendships among college students, particularly in co-educational environments like Chaudhary Charan Singh University, challenge inherited prejudices. One Hindu student reflected: "Mere sabse ache dost Muslim hain. Par jab ghar mein koi yeh jaanta hai, to ek khamoshi si chhaj jaati hai." My best friends are Muslims. But when my family finds out, an awkward silence descends (Interview with student, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, 2025). This ambivalence marks the liminal space many youths occupy, where friendships flourish but are

restrained by social boundaries.

7.4 Faith-Based Dialogue and Religious Moderation

Religious leaders, often viewed as contributors to division, can also become facilitators of peace. In areas like Abu Lane and Sadar Bazar, moderate Hindu priests and Muslim clerics have occasionally issued joint appeals for calm during elections or communal processions. These declarations are often carried out through miking, pamphlets, and Friday sermons.

One local Maulana emphasized: "Agar ullema aur pandit ek jaise bolna shuru karen, toh log bhi ek jaise sochna shuru karenge." If clerics and priests start speaking alike, people will begin to think alike (Interview with Maulana from Lisari Gate, 2025).

Religious spaces themselves can become zones of dialogue. In Brahmपुरi, a temple trust donated blankets to a madrasa during the winter, a gesture that triggered wider goodwill. Similarly, some Muslim communities offered water stalls (pyau) during Hindu yatras, reviving traditional symbols of syncretic hospitality.

7.5 The Everyday as Resistance

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the very act of living together, amidst historical trauma and contemporary polarization, is itself a form of resistance. The woman who buys vegetables from a shopkeeper of another faith, the man who shares a rickshaw with his religious other, or the children who play without prejudice, all enact a quiet defiance of divisive ideologies.

These micro-negotiations of space, emotion, and identity are not accidental but cultivated over time through necessity, empathy, and habit. They are not idealized models of secularism but functional arrangements of tolerance and civility.

Belonging in Meerut is not about dissolving identity, but about managing difference with dignity. As one elderly Muslim resident remarked: "Yeh sheher jhagde se nahi, rishton se chal raha hai." This city survives not through conflict, but through relationships (Interview with elderly Muslim resident, Sadar Bazar, 2025).

8. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study of Hindu-Muslim relations in mixed neighborhoods of Meerut reveals a multi-layered reality that resists simplistic binaries. The findings suggest that while communal boundaries exist and are periodically intensified by historical trauma, political narratives, and institutional failures, they are simultaneously challenged by everyday acts of coexistence, shared urban aspirations, and informal solidarities.

8.1 Duality of Spatial Coexistence and Emotional Distance

A recurring theme that emerged is the duality of proximity without intimacy. Hindus and Muslims in mixed areas like Brahmपुरi, Lisari Gate, and Abu Lane live within close physical quarters, share marketplaces, and send their children to the same schools. Yet emotional boundaries persist. The spatial co-presence has not eliminated suspicion, especially in moments of perceived threat or misinformation.

This tension manifests in the symbolic marking of spaces, the use of flags, religious graffiti, community-specific shops, and in hesitations around inter-community friendships, especially across genders. Nonetheless, residents from both sides emphasized that violence is not inevitable, but often externally provoked.

8.2 Interdependence and Fragile Trust

Economic interdependence plays a crucial role in sustaining peaceful coexistence. Hindu and Muslim traders, artisans, and workers collaborate regularly, especially in traditional sectors like textiles, food services, and construction. However, this trust is fragile and conditional. One incident, even based on rumor, can unravel years of cooperation.

Despite this fragility, the functional cooperation that underpins daily survival acts as a buffer against polarization. Shopkeepers who have worked together for decades often serve as first responders to tension, attempting to calm mobs or protect each other's businesses during flare-ups.

8.3 Role of Memory, Trauma, and Generational Divide

The study reveals a deep intergenerational divide in perceptions of communal relations. Older residents, both Hindu and Muslim, often recall a past marked by greater trust and interdependence. They reference shared festivals, joint crisis responses, and marriages attended across faiths.

In contrast, younger generations, especially those growing up post-1990s, exhibit greater apprehension and inherited mistrust. Their understanding is shaped less by personal experience and more by familial memory, media narratives, and digital content. This generational tension is key to understanding both the decline and potential revival of interfaith harmony.

8.4 The Erosion and Reinvention of Civic Belonging

A significant insight from the fieldwork is the transformation of belonging from a strictly religious identity to a more civic and urban one, particularly among the educated middle class. Demands for better roads, healthcare, education, and municipal services often transcend religious affiliation.

However, this civic identity is unevenly distributed. In underdeveloped Muslim-majority areas, continued infrastructural neglect and state apathy reinforce feelings of marginalization and exclusion from the urban mainstream. Without inclusive urban planning and equitable governance, the promise of shared belonging remains limited.

8.5 Sites of Resistance and the Everyday Secular

Perhaps the most hopeful finding is the presence of everyday resistance to communal narratives. Tailoring shops jointly run by Hindu-Muslim women, interfaith youth initiatives, shared grief at funerals, and quiet acts of neighborly help all point to a resilient fabric of lived secularism.

This "secularism from below" does not rely on state ideology or elite discourse. It emerges organically, shaped by need, habit, and shared vulnerability. These acts are often invisible in dominant media but form the backbone of communal peace.

8.6 The Role of State, Media, and Digital Platforms

The role of the state and media in shaping communal boundaries was widely acknowledged by respondents. Police bias, slow legal recourse, and political opportunism during elections were identified as structural enablers of division. Likewise, misinformation on WhatsApp and inflammatory television debates were seen as amplifiers of hate.

Yet, respondents also called for greater accountability, civic education, and community media literacy, suggesting that while external narratives influence relations, they are not beyond challenge or reform.

The findings from Meerut's mixed neighborhoods align with broader academic observations about the coexistence of conflict and collaboration in Indian urban life. They echo Varshney's civic network theory (Varshney, 2002) and Das's work on ordinary ethics (Das, 2007), demonstrating that peaceful coexistence is not a given, but a practiced, negotiated, and continuously reconstructed reality.

The research affirms that while state failure, politicized religion, and digital toxicity pose serious challenges, the potential for reconciliation lies within communities themselves. Empowering local institutions, recognizing everyday peacebuilders, and integrating civic education into schools could offer pathways forward.

9. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

9.1 Conclusion

The city of Meerut, often remembered in headlines for its communal riots or political flashpoints, offers a far more complex and nuanced story when examined through the lens of everyday urban life. This research has explored the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim relationships in the city's mixed neighborhoods, revealing a paradoxical interplay of boundaries and belonging, fragmentation and familiarity, division and dependency.

Historically shaped by colonial legacies, demographic shifts, and episodes of violence, most notably the 1857 uprising, the 1987 Hashimpura massacre, and the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition, Meerut has experienced deep communal fissures. Yet, it has also nurtured zones of coexistence through daily economic transactions, shared public spaces, and interpersonal relationships that defy communal rhetoric.

The research finds that physical proximity does not necessarily produce emotional closeness, and spatial cohabitation can exist alongside deep-seated mistrust. Nevertheless, these mixed neighborhoods have not been passive victims of larger political currents. Rather, they demonstrate remarkable resilience, managing tensions through informal practices of civility, micro-solidarities, and negotiated boundaries.

While religion continues to shape identity, a parallel urban civic identity is emerging, especially among younger and middle-class residents, based on common grievances around governance, infrastructure, and education. However, these emerging solidarities remain fragile, constantly tested by politicized media narratives, electoral polarization, and institutional bias.

Perhaps the most powerful insight of this study is that coexistence in Meerut is not an absence of conflict, but a presence of effort. It is built not on romanticized notions of harmony, but on the hard work of daily negotiation, trust-building, and empathetic interdependence.

9.2 Suggestions

To strengthen Hindu-Muslim relations and foster more inclusive urban neighborhoods in Meerut and similar cities, the following measures are suggested.

(1) **Community Dialogue Platforms:** There is a pressing need for institutionalized interfaith dialogue mechanisms at the ward and mohalla level. These could be facilitated by local NGOs, educational institutions, or municipal bodies and should involve religious leaders, youth, women, and civic actors. Dialogue should not only be reactive during crises but also routine and proactive.

(2) **Inclusive Urban Planning:** Urban segregation often exacerbates communal tensions. Municipal authorities should integrate inclusivity principles in housing schemes, road development, sanitation, and schooling. Special attention must be paid to the infrastructure of Muslim-majority areas, not as vote-bank appeasement, but as a matter of rights-based governance.

(3) **Reforms in Policing and Legal Accountability:** To restore public trust, especially among marginalized communities, bias in policing must be addressed. This includes community policing models, recruitment of personnel from all communities, swift and transparent investigation of communal violence, and delayed justice, such as in Hashimpura, only deepens the sense of abandonment and fuels cycles of resentment.

(4) **Media and Digital Literacy Campaigns:** The role of misinformation via WhatsApp, YouTube, and TV is deeply corrosive. Civil society and state agencies should develop digital literacy programs, especially for youth. Training should include fact-checking, ethical sharing, and communal harmony content. Media watchdogs should also be encouraged to monitor and report hate speech and bias.

(5) **School Curriculum Reforms:** Schools can be sites of both exclusion and inclusion. The curriculum must reflect India's composite culture, with balanced portrayals of historical events and contributions from all communities. Teachers should be sensitized to communal dynamics and

trained to prevent bias and encourage empathy in classrooms.

(6) Encouragement of Interfaith Youth Initiatives: Youth from both communities should be provided platforms for joint civic engagement, such as Blood donation drives, environmental campaigns, cultural exchange programs, and sports tournaments. Such initiatives build bridges of trust early in life, creating the possibility of long-term pluralism.

(7) Recognition and Support for Peace-builders: Local individuals and collectives who have prevented riots, offered shelter, or sustained interfaith friendships should be publicly acknowledged. Recognition (through awards, media coverage, or civic honors) sends a powerful signal that peace-building is patriotic and worthy of emulation. Meerut's mixed neighborhoods offer a powerful lens into the contested but resilient reality of Indian pluralism. They reveal that while majoritarianism, hate politics, and historical trauma cast long shadows, the light of everyday belonging and shared futures still flickers. If nurtured with care, this light can outshine the forces of division and restore the city's legacy not only as a site of conflict but as a crucible of coexistence.

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