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Exclusion, Urbanity and Education: A Case Study of a Muslim Neighbourhood in Kolkata
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Abstract: Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a ‘Muslim’ neighbourhood in Kolkata, the paper explores the implications of socio-spatial exclusion on educational options of Muslims in urban India. While general backwardness and spatial stigma often hinder their access to leading educational institutions, the reality of living in a communally defined space imposes further limitations on their educational choices. Misinformed government policy, centered on perceptions of a monolithic Muslim identity, further shrinks educational options available to them. Within the emerging neoliberal urban, however, education is perceived by many as the primary avenue for social mobility who increasingly organize their aspirations of ‘betterment’ around it. Using interwoven narratives the paper studies the changing urban and its consequences on a marginalized community’s access to education in the city.

Keywords: Education, Muslims, Kolkata, Urban spaces, Aspirations

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1. Introduction

In the past three decades or so, neoliberal economic and social policies have visibly altered the face of Indian cities, producing new kinds of inequalities within an already divided urban landscape. This has led to immense social polarization evident, among other aspects, in the stark contrasts between the gated communities of the urban elites on the one hand and the pockets of high poverty and slums on the other.\(^1\) Existing differences centred around caste, ethnicity and religious group membership – which have themselves, for a long time, played a significant role in shaping communities’ ‘rights to the city’ – have increasingly come under the purview of the neoliberal logic. This has led to further intensification of inequalities between marginalised and dominant communities, which is reflected in their very different access to basic urban amenities such as housing, healthcare and education.

Given the common perception that education is a primary factor in achieving social mobility, it bears the potential to become an important site for contestations of and negotiations with neoliberalism. Nonetheless, as Pauline Lipman has pointed out,\(^2\) the neoliberal agenda is itself predicated on educational reforms to a great extent and works to align teachers, parents and students from all sections of society, including those from economically and ethnically marginalised backgrounds, with privatised educational markets. This makes it even more difficult to disentangle the often conflicting needs, desires and aspirations of such marginalised communities around education.

Within India’s urban spaces, these complexities can be located in the large-scale privatisation of education especially at school level, the almost complete withdrawal of the rich and upwardly mobile from state-sponsored education, the dwindling quality of education in public schools, and, the generally shrinking accountability of public education. These have pushed parents, even those from poorer and disprivileged sections of society who can but ill afford it, towards some version of private schooling for their children.\(^3\) Further, in the neoliberal context, ‘quality

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education’ has also assumed the unmistakable connotation of education in the English medium. This has achieved new legitimacy vis-à-vis the demands of the emerging job market and the aspirational ideals of a rapidly expanding urban middle class, a class which has acquired a new outward-looking, globalised character.4 This has also meant that parents, as well as preferring to send their children to private schools, also strive hard to provide an English-medium education for their children in hopes of expanding social capital and accessing mobility.

However, such developments have also meant that for a large section of the poor, ‘quality education’ remains a distant dream. Many among them have very little option than to fall back on state-provided education, the quality and potential of which is rather dismal. In most cases this has led to a vast deficit in educational capabilities of the urban poor; often forcing them to regard ‘education’ as a disinvestment than as an opportunity for personal development and social mobility.5

The precariousness of the urban poor in India vis-à-vis the neoliberal market is further intensified through their social group membership. Caste and religious affiliation have time and again been identified as factors limiting communities’ access to basic urban amenities, as has been evident from the experiences of Muslims and Dalits across Indian cities.6

Levels of deprivation amongst India’s urban Muslims have been particularly high in comparison to those belonging to other socio-religious communities as well as to their own rural counterparts. Both in terms of education and employment, urban Muslims have lagged behind almost every other community, a fact that stems, to a large extent, from the entrenched prejudice harboured towards members of the community both at the levels of institutional as well as

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4 For the ‘aspirational’ attributes of the Indian middle class see Surinder S. Jodhka and Aseem Prakash, The Indian Middle Class (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).
everyday practice. Intermittent outbreaks of communal disturbances, growing insecurity and spatial segregation have further turned urban Muslims into one of the most vulnerable and excluded social groups in the country.

It is within the broader context of neoliberal globalisation in urban India, and the new dimensions of marginality to which it has given rise, that this paper seeks to locate the consequences of the changing urban milieu on the ability of one marginal community – in this case, Muslims – to access education. This is done by drawing on data collected in the course of ethnographic fieldwork in one of the so called ‘musholman paras’ (Muslim neighbourhoods) of Kolkata, a city in eastern India, where like many other cities across the country the Muslim population is highly ‘ghettoised’. Rather than being just one aspect of social exclusion, spatial exclusion itself emerges as an important constitutive factor in shaping Muslim experiences in the city, imposing its own limitations on the community’s access to the urban. The paper explores the often contradictory stances harboured by Muslims – especially those belonging to the poor and the lower middle classes – towards education, as well as their hopes and aspirations around a ‘better life’ as they negotiate their lives in a rapidly changing urban milieu that continues to view their presence with a deep distrust.

2. The Muslims of Kolkata: Spatial Segregation and Dimensions of Urban Marginality

The Muslims of Kolkata are a large community of diverse ethnic groups who currently constitute just over a fifth of the city’s population. However, in spite of their substantial numbers and vibrant historical presence, Muslims remain one of the most marginalised groups in the city. A very apparent indicator of their exclusion from the urban mainstream is the stark segregation of Muslim residential areas in the city from those of its Hindu quarters. Kolkata’s Muslims are concentrated in a few clearly discernible neighbourhoods – such as Metiaburz, Rajabazar, Park

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7 According to the 2011 Census of India, Muslims constitute 20.6% of Kolkata’s population.
8 Muslims with diverse regional origins had migrated to Kolkata during the period of its development as the principal city of the British Empire in India in the late eighteenth century, a process that continued well up to the first two decades of the twentieth century. For a note on the composition and settlement patterns of early Muslim groups in Kolkata see M. K. A. Siddiqui, *Social Organization of Muslim Groups in Kolkata* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1974).
Circus and Cossipore – with sharp boundaries, both metaphorical and, at times, physical, setting them apart from the rest.

This is a far cry from the early Muslim settlements in the city, where like most other migrant communities, Muslims bearing similar regional and occupational affiliations stayed together. These neighbourhoods were not really communally constituted in the way one finds them today. Their present form derives, to a great extent, from the particular social and political history of Bengal during the late colonial period when relations between Hindus and Muslims became increasingly communalised. The event of Partition and the spate of terrible communal rioting that followed played a significant role in the ‘unmixing’ of the city’s Hindu and Muslim population, leading to the development of discrete, yet internally highly heterogeneous Muslim neighbourhoods popularly designated ‘ghettos’. Overcrowded and congested, with a steady inflow of low-skilled migrant Muslims fleeing persecution elsewhere in the city and the hinterland, these neighbourhoods soon came to bear an entrenched spatial stigma, set apart and cautiously avoided by the dominant Hindu groups who viewed them as aberrations within the familiar landscape of their city.10

While the presence of Muslim ghettos in Kolkata was documented by anthropologists as early as the 1960s,11 there has hardly been any systematic account of how the city’s Muslims fared. Nonetheless, even going by the sporadic commentaries that are available, Muslims encountered a bleak and rather uncertain future in the city. Being purportedly the ones who had demanded a separate state for their community, they remained in the popular psyche the original ‘traitors’, whose allegiance to India remained a perpetual question mark.12 For the poorer sections among Muslims, ensuring ‘safety’ from communal persecution entailed a number of compromises that had to be negotiated at the level of everyday social existence. The initial years saw a steady contraction of physical and symbolic spaces available to Muslims, apparent in the controversies around Muslim graveyards, decibel limits of *azaan*, routes taken by *muharram* processions and

Many ordinary Muslims were also seen to voluntarily give up their age-old rights over observance of public rituals like cow-sacrifice and distribution of beef during Bakr-Id, since it was considered to be hurtful to predominant Hindu sentiments; however such symbolic gestures were hardly enough to buy security for them. Hindus often saw it not as an act of magnanimity but rather as a strategic gesture on part of the Muslims who now ‘knew their true place’ in the new social order. Thus, within a short period of a few years, the Muslims of Kolkata had dramatically transformed from a community with substantial social and political clout into one increasingly pushed to the margins of the city’s social, economic and political life, a reality that has continued to prevail to date despite significant changes in the city’s socio-political context in recent decades.

The sustained marginalisation of the city’s Muslims, however, remains a puzzle especially when viewed in the context of the socio-political context of Kolkata, and, in general, West Bengal. For one, Kolkata has recorded relatively far lower levels of communal violence because of which it has been considered to be relatively safe for Muslims. Again, the professedly secular political culture of the Left Front which was in power in the state for more than three decades (1977-2011), the longest ever known for a democratically elected communist party, meant that religion never directly entered the official discourse as has recurrently been the case in other Indian states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat and, more recently, Uttar Pradesh. In fact, the prompt diffusing of communal disturbance is said to have been a remarkable quality identifiable with the Left regime.

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14 Separated by a gap of nearly three decades, M.K.A Siddiqui’s “Life in the Slums of Calcutta: Some Aspects”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 4, no. 50 (1969), and *Marginal Muslim Communities of Calcutta* (New Delhi: IOS, 2000) address the extreme conditions of deprivation encountered by a large number of Muslims in the city. A recent intervention can be found in Jeremy Seabrook and I. A. Siddiqui’s *People without History: India’s Muslim Ghettos* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2011) which further documents the acute lack of infrastructural support in the poorest Muslim concentration areas of Kolkata.
Even though Muslim minoritisation\textsuperscript{17} had never become an issue until well into the last few years of its rule, large numbers of the community suffered inadvertently owing to the generally antiquated socio-economic policies pursued by the Left Front. The Left government in Kolkata, because of its strong ideological resistance in the initial years, opened up to neoliberalism much later in comparison to most other Indian states, which were prompt in responding to the demands of a changing economy. This explains, to a large extent, why the state and its capital city lagged behind, critically earning the widespread epithet of [the] ‘black hole’ of Third World urbanization.\textsuperscript{18} To that extent, the regime was also slow in coming up with educational reforms necessary to create a workforce fit to be absorbed by new employment opportunities generated by neoliberalism. The decision taken under the Left Front government during the mid-1980s to withdraw English completely from the primary level in favour of education in the vernacular proved to be one such measure.\textsuperscript{19} Apart from seriously limiting what turned out to be an indispensable skill within the emerging economy, it inadvertently paved the way for the emergence of privatised education which lay beyond the reach of most of the lower middle classes and the poor social groups, which included large numbers of Muslims.

Most importantly, the fact that the regime, with its over-emphasis on ‘class’, ignored the issues of identity-related deprivation further accounts for the predicament of Muslim groups who were found to be worse off in comparison to Muslims elsewhere in the country in terms of almost all indices of socio-economic development when the ‘Sachar Committee’ submitted its report (referred to hereinafter as the ‘Sachar Report’) in 2006.\textsuperscript{20}

Misguided state policy and enduring social prejudice at the everyday level seem to have contributed to the continuing marginalisation of Muslims in Kolkata. Furthermore, the past

\textsuperscript{17} Dipankar Gupta, “Survivors or Survivals: Reconciling Citizenship and Cultural Particularisms”, \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} 34, no. 33 (1999): 2320.

\textsuperscript{18} Ananya Roy, \textit{City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and The Politics of Poverty} (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), ix.


\textsuperscript{20} The Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, popularly known as the Sachar Committee after its chairperson Dr. Rajinder Sachar, was an official committee set up by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) after its coming to power to assess the socio-economic attainments of different socio-religious groups (SRGs) in the country. The resulting report is generally referred to as the ‘Sachar Report’. See Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Government of India, \textit{Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India} (New Delhi: Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Government of India, 2006).
fifteen years have also seen a rise in the rather disturbing trend of the occasional coming together of political and socio-cultural discourses relating to Muslims with the consolidation of Hindutva politics at the pan-Indian level. The culturally rampant tropes of Muslim othering, prevalent in the popular urban psyche, seem to have increasingly become the predominant discourse mediating Muslim access to the city and its utilities, and assert themselves through the continued spatial segregation of the community from the urban mainstream. It is within this broader framework of multi-dimensional forms of urban marginality that the present paper attempts to locate Muslim experiences and aspirations in Kolkata. This is done by taking up the issue of education, choices around which appear to play a pivotal role in defining life chances of diverse Muslim groups in the city.

3. Data and Method

The observations presented in this paper are drawn from an ethnographic study of the neighbourhood of Park Circus in Kolkata, nearly three quarters of whose population was, at the time, composed of different Muslim groups. Fieldwork was carried out between 2012 and 2014 as part of a larger study aimed at reaching situated understandings of Muslim experiences of socio-spatial exclusion in urban India. In the course of this, narratives around education and employment emerged as key pointers to the socio-economic realities and aspirations of a large proportion of Muslims in the neighbourhood. Taking its cue from these, as well as material gathered from subsequent brief field visits, the rest of the paper builds on interwoven narratives structured around local Muslim perceptions of education and employment and related understandings of a ‘better life’ in the city.

After a brief descriptive profile of the neighbourhood and its constitution in the local urban imaginary as a Muslim ‘ghetto’, the paper proceeds to give an account of the principal occupations and types of employment in which the majority of Muslims in the locality are engaged. Apart from providing a broad income description of the neighbourhood’s residents, this also helps in locating Muslim aspirations with regard to their futures in the city. In the process, the section also explores the extent to which religious identity and residence in a negatively

21 Chatterjee, Narratives of Exclusion, 92-9.
defined space affects Muslims’ access to the urban labour market. This leads to the second substantial section of the paper, which is a detailed engagement with the educational opportunities available to, and educational choices made by, the Muslims of Park Circus. While education at first glance appears to be the obvious avenue for accessing social mobility, multiple and often contradictory viewpoints emerge with regard to the nature and level of education aspired to by lower middle-class and poorer Muslim parents. This section also explores the ways in which education and access to the emerging urban job market following liberalization becomes an important site of mediation between community and modernity within a rapidly changing metropolis.

The narratives cited in the paper have emerged from lengthy interactions with Muslims from the neighbourhood, often over several meetings, during the time I spent in the field. Even though my focus was primarily on the less privileged sections, I also interacted with a number of Muslims drawn from the local middle classes who, given their particular vantage point, seemed to have a more well-formed opinion about the overall trends in the fields of Muslim education and employment in the city. These multiple voices, while complicating the narrative, also highlight the contextual nature of Muslim experiences and ambitions in the city. In presenting the data, care has been taken to maintain the anonymity of my respondents by altering names and addresses wherever necessary. The narratives have been translated from Hindi, Urdu and Bengali by the author and original statements of respondents wherever used in quotations have been italicised. I have also added the brackets used in the quotations from respondents for purposes of clarifying the context whenever necessary.
4. A Profile of a 'Muslim' Neighbourhood

The neighbourhood of Park Circus, where the study is set, is relatively centrally located within the city’s geography and has a highly heterogeneous population of both Muslim as well as non-Muslim groups such as Bengali and non-Bengali-speaking Hindus, Anglo-Indians and native Christians. Despite its origin as a purely residential enclave for the city’s affluent and progressive Muslims in 1918, over time, and following the general fortunes of the city’s Muslim population, the neighbourhood became home to large numbers of poor, working-class Muslims who in spite of differences of language, ethnicity, sect, and caste reside together within its precincts in the numerous illegal and semi-legal tenements that dot the neighbourhood. The numbers of the affluent and educated middle classes who had been its traditional occupants has dwindled steadily since Partition and they have, at present, a rather small presence in the neighbourhood.

Despite the large presence of poor slum-dwelling Muslims, Park Circus nonetheless has a rather ‘cosmopolitan’ ambience. Its central location ensures that it is conveniently connected to all urban utilities and modern infrastructure. Indeed, during the daytime, if one were to walk its principal thoroughfares, the neighbourhood would appear no different from other, more conventional, parts of the city. It is only when one ventures into its inner recesses that the ghetto-like character of the neighbourhood, spilling over with semblances of communal life, becomes apparent. Most of the localities reproduce, at least at the immediate level, patterns of traditional community composed as they are of migrants who have come and settled over the years on the basis of regional and kin-based ties. The rapid increase in the number of underprivileged Muslims is borne out by the growth of slums of all sizes spilling out from every usable space in the neighbourhood. Despite their physical proximity, the poor and the lower middle classes among the Muslims inhabit a very different social world as compared to their affluent middle-class counterparts. This is apparent in the very minimal levels of social interaction between the

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23 A Muslim neighbourhood in Kolkata, or for that matter in any other city in India, does not merely mean a locality where the majority of residents are Muslims. A culturally loaded term, it connotes a space of difference, an aberration within the known and homogeneous landscape of the city where familiar values of morality and order cease to find resonance. For an elaboration see Anasua Chatterjee, "Othered City", Indian Quarterly, Apr.-Jun. 2018.

24 McPherson, The Muslim Microcosm.

two. The hopes, aims and ambitions of this large group of poor and lower middle-class Muslims, striving to survive in a rapidly transforming urban landscape, are the primary focus of this study.

5. Overview of Occupations and Employment Profile

Unlike most other Muslim pockets in the city, which can be still be identified in terms of the occupational constitution of their population, Park Circus does not have any specific trade that local Muslims subscribe to; a fact that perhaps owes itself to the peculiar history of its inception as a residential area for affluent Muslim groups who desired to remain in close proximity to the administrative centre of the colonial White Town. Currently the neighbourhood is composed of a conglomerate of occupational groups engaged in diverse economic pursuits within or outside its immediate vicinity. Even though one finds traces of traditional Muslim family trades in localities bearing names such as Ayenapara, Churipara or Kasiabagan, named after glass makers, bangle makers, butchers and the like, most of these have died out over time. Only a very small section of the local Muslims seems to find it lucrative to carry on with their traditional trades, while the rest have increasingly opted for paid work either directly as wage-labourers in larger enterprises specializing in the same trade or as job contractors under them.

Given its rather central location vis-à-vis the city, Park Circus also has many large and medium-sized private business establishments. The largest shopping mall of the city, employing several hundreds of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers, had recently been built in the neighbourhood. But such enterprises usually, as a matter of policy, refrain from employing labour from within the immediate neighbourhood apprehending ‘unmanageable’ (in the words of a local job contractor) labour troubles and disruptions of work since in the event of any labour dispute, local employees could potentially mobilise members of their quam (community) to create trouble.

As Masood (38), a member of a prominent qureshi (traditionally a caste of butchers and meat-sellers) family owning several business interests in the area explained,

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26 For the relevance of socio-spatial boundaries within so-called homogeneous Muslim localities in Indian cities see Nida Kirmani, *Questioning a Muslim Woman: Identity and Insecurity in an Urban Indian Locality* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013).

It is not wise....they ask for loans, they will not turn up in time, and there is nothing you can do. If you sack a labourer the whole bustee comes out to quarrel. People say ‘they are of your own community, how can you do so?’.....but see, in business you cannot afford to be lenient. We usually prefer employing labour from outside.28

While locally generated regulated private sector employment is virtually absent, it is almost an established fact that Muslims scarcely find employment in the organised government sector. In the absence of proper data it is difficult to put in exact terms the proportion of Muslims in Kolkata at different levels of employment with the state government. Nevertheless, the figures presented by the Sachar Report show that Muslim representation in government sector jobs in West Bengal is abysmally low.29 In Park Circus, one can virtually count on one hand the number of Muslims engaged as officers, police personnel, doctors and engineers in the state or central government services. Stories of disillusionment and cynicism abound, and several of my respondents pointed at the systematic prejudice against Muslim candidates displayed by the selection committee members as the main reason behind their failure to secure such jobs. Mr. Nazmul Karim, (56), a professor in a university explained it thus,

….it is not always a question of merit. A large number of Muslims clear the written examinations. But only a few manage to qualify in the interview round……the prejudice is particularly strong in the lower rungs. If you consider the Group C and D jobs you will find only about 2 percent Muslims. And selection for these jobs is done through personal interview; it shows deliberate discrimination and malpractice.


29 In spite of the high proportion of the Muslim population (27.01%) in the state, only an abysmal 1.54 percent of those belonging to the working age group are employed in regular public sector jobs. From Report titled Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal produced by Social Network for Assistance to People (SNAP) in association with Guidance Guild and Pratichi Trust India, Kolkata 2016 as cited in Suvojit Bagchi and Shiv Sahay Singh, “Muslims in West Bengal more deprived, disproportionately poorer: Amartya Sen”, The Hindu, February 15th 2016 https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/Muslims-in-West-Bengal-more-deprived-disproportionately-poorer-Amartya-Sen/article15617960.ece accessed 20th July 2018.
As a result, there is little option for the ordinary Muslim than to fall back on the burgeoning informal economy of the city where despite the ready availability of employment, work is temporary and, in general, ill-paid.30

The local informal economy comprises a number of small-scale business units which lined the inner streets of the neighbourhood. These ranged from hardware stores to small and petty local eateries, tailoring units, meat shops of various scales, bakeries, garages and the like. Petty traders selling their wares in hand-pushed carts are to be found in almost every corner of the neighbourhood. Small businesses operating out of individual homes or clusters of anganbaris in the slum settlements are also common. Even so, the segmentary and uncertain nature of these enterprises is hard to miss.

Given the limited scope of the local economy, it is perhaps worthwhile looking more closely at the neighbourhood as a net supplier of relatively cheap and unskilled/semi-skilled labour vis-à-vis the city. An evident indicator of this is that a large section of the local slum dwellers are either first or second generation migrants to the neighbourhood who have come to the city in search of work.31 Having no specialised trade, they work as daily wage labourers by acquiring basic on-the-job skills, and transfer remittances home to their families.32 They usually use kin networks to find accommodation and establish themselves in the city, visible in their tendency to cluster in the large slum stretches along the eastern fringe of the neighbourhood.33 Migration patterns tend to be long-term, periodic or cyclical depending on the point of origin and the nature of work the labourer is engaged in the city.34 In the many slums of Park Circus, migrant Muslims from various districts of Bihar, Jharkhand and eastern Uttar Pradesh live in more or less continuous stretches along with their regional kin groups. While some of them have lived for two

30 For a description of informal economy in India see Barbara Harris-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4-7. For working conditions within Kolkata’s informal sector see Roy, *City Requiem*.
31 An appraisal of recent trends in migration in Kolkata can be found in the report of the Institute of Social Sciences and UNICEF’s report on the *Children of Migrant Poor: A Human Development Perspective* (2014).
32 Bose, “Calcutta: A Premature Metropolis”.
33 Harris-White, *India Working*, Denis Vidal and Philippe Cadène *Webs of Trade: Dynamics of Business Communities in Western India* (Delhi: Manohar Press, 1997).
or three generations in the city, and are old tenants, many of the more recent migrants are men living in shared rooms who have their families staying in villages which they visit annually. Apart from inter-state migrants, Park Circus also has a number of native Bengali Muslim migrants who come from adjacent districts for finding work; they usually stay in rented holdings in the local slums during the week, returning to their homes for holidays or when work is scarce.

Another way by which the neighbourhood provides cheap labour to the city is through the innumerable abysmally low-paid piecemeal jobs that a large section of slum dwelling families, especially women, engage in to supplement their meagre family incomes. Such work includes a range of commissions of comparatively low-skill tasks such as fixing bulb holdings, cutting leather for purses, packing tobacco leaf, embellishing bindis and so on to the more difficult and time consuming exercises of embroidery, knitting, tailoring and zari work. Contracts are usually put out by entrepreneurs from other parts of the city who transfer the raw materials to the slums or get them collected by the slum dwellers, who then complete the assignment from their own homes in return for money. But given the long chain of middlemen involved the earnings are dismal despite the long hours devoted to the tasks. The abundant supply of cheap labour, along with a general unawareness of minimum wages, has meant that there is little any worker can do in terms of bargaining with the contractor. That the greater part of this work force is composed of uneducated and disprivileged women further tilts the scale in favour of the entrepreneurs.35

Further, there is no minimum wage or work day guarantee and the entire system hinges on the decision of the contractors. As a result, levels of economic insecurity among this section of the local population are very high.

Few have access to either bank accounts or bank loans. Several pockets of the neighbourhood were, in fact, said to fall within the ‘blacklisted’ categories of banks, because of repeated ‘non-recovery’ of loans. Consequently bank credit lies well beyond the reach of most ordinary Muslims. As Md. Yusuf, (29), a garage worker who dreams of owning a taxi someday described,

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The moment they hear I am from Tiljala they will find some fault in the papers and not pass my application. Also where do you think people like us can get papers from? We cannot provide the kind of guarantees they want...

Even though there are a few private organizations, such as Sanjeevani and Nayedin, who lend money outside of banks, their systems of guarantee are very exacting and interest rates astronomically high. Thus locals generally refrain from taking out loans with them except in the event of emergencies.

Though there are certain schemes of financial assistance for Muslims according to the West Bengal Minorities Commission website, the actual instances of such assistance seemed to be rather few and far between.\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps two state initiatives that seem to have actually had an impact on generating employment and economic security of some kind were the Hundred Days’ Work Scheme and the self-help initiatives for women in the slums. At the same time, these schemes were limited in terms of the numbers of men and women they could bring within their ambit. Further access to them remained significantly bound up with an individual’s or their family’s connections with the local administrative outfit, and was hence not readily available to the less politically active among them.

Given its limited scope, the local informal economy can absorb only a small proportion of the lower and lower middle classes. For those who venture outside the neighbourhood for work the realities seem far from pleasant. Studies of the Indian labour market, especially the informal sector, have shown how segmentary it is, and how difficult it remains for workers to find employment without contacts.\textsuperscript{37} Being ‘Muslim’ only further complicates the situation; and makes it far more challenging to find work in the city. Several of my respondents recounted occasions when they had to use fake Hindu names, conceal other obvious pointers to religious identity, and even suppress residential addresses in order to secure work in the Hindu-operated businesses in the city.

\textsuperscript{36} According to the West Bengal Minorities Development and Finance Corporation the total amount of loans disbursed for the district of Kolkata during 2011-12 was 39.913 million. Data sourced from \url{http://www.wbmdfc.org/report/district-wise-disbursement-of-loans-for-the-year-2011-12.html} accessed on 1st April 2014.

\textsuperscript{37} Harris-White, \textit{India Working}. 

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Another way in which symbols of religious identity affect Muslims in the workplace, usually in middle-level jobs, is through the enduring association of tradition with the Islamic way of dressing and self-presentation. As Razia, (24), who works as a typist and front desk executive at a motor showroom on nearby A.J.C. Bose Road described,

> During the interview they pointed out that I was wearing the headscarf.....my skills somehow were questioned because of my attire. They wanted to know if I was that religious how could I work in such a modern office.....it is as if wearing a *nakab* compromises your efficiency.

Similar experiences are recounted by several Muslim men in the neighbourhood who are routinely met with disapproval if they turn up in their traditional *kurta-pyjama* or *tabeez* at their workplace. In such contexts, religion seems to become the primary basis for defining the identity of these men and women against which all other attributes required of a modern employee are assessed.

The multiple ways in which the social dynamics of the city has worked over the years to constrict gainful employment opportunities for the larger part of the neighbourhood’s Muslims, leaving them with very little option than to join ranks of the swelling informal economy, becomes apparent here. Even then, their chances are limited owing to their perceived religious identity and the fact that they reside in a stigmatised urban space. On the other hand, successive phases of neoliberal development in the city[38] have also left their mark on the neighbourhood’s inhabitants. The burgeoning sites of consumption in the shape of swanky shopping malls, decked up flyovers, privatised ‘star-rated’ schools and hospitals that flank the neighbourhood has presented new understandings of a desirable lifestyle among the lower-middle-class urban dweller. The sections that follow attempt to assess Muslim perceptions around a coveted lifestyle

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in the changing city and the ways in which education, given its potential status as a significant facilitator of social mobility,\textsuperscript{39} figures in their lives for achieving it.

6. Perceptions around 'Middle Class-ness', 'Good Education' and 'Better Life'\textsuperscript{40}

Muslim demands around development and social mobility in India have traditionally been framed in the language of identity even though recent literature on the subject suggests that there has been a gradual movement towards more secular concerns where issues of better education, housing, healthcare, respectable employment and greater participation in public life have gained significance. India’s Muslims, as has been pointed out, want better jobs, they want good schools for their children and the ability to live ‘normal’ lives in safe and healthy neighbourhoods.\textsuperscript{41} It appears that Muslims as a group are keen to shed the minority tag, to leave behind the ‘politics of grievance’ that has marked the community since Independence, and join the national mainstream.

In India’s urban centres, Muslims, just like their other religious counterparts, are exposed to a rapidly changing socio-economic milieu complete with the promises of modern cosmopolitan life. With the large scale entry of multinational companies and the simultaneous growth of a transnational media and consumption culture in the country, new economies of desire have developed. Boundaries between ‘traditional India’ and the ‘modern West’ have broken down and a new self-image as a modern global player has emerged among urban Indians. Within this self-image, the modern Indian citizen is one who is educated, aware, confident and articulate, has acquired new and ‘westernized’ tastes\textsuperscript{42} and is remarkably knowledgeable about opportunities of self-development and advancement.\textsuperscript{43} In this view, the modern Indian citizen is one who has

\textsuperscript{39} Divya Vaid, “Patterns of Social Mobility and the Role of Education in India”, \textit{Contemporary South Asia} 24, no. 3 (2016): 285-312.

\textsuperscript{40} Borrowed from Dipankar Gupta’s formulations of the contemporary Muslim urban dweller based on studies of Ahmedabad and Mumbai’s Muslim neighbourhoods. See Dipankar Gupta, \textit{Justice before Reconciliation} (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011).

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{42} Minna Savaala, \textit{Middle Class Moralities: Everyday Struggles for Longing and Prestige in India} (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010).

worked to create a new India, carefully set apart from the old, recasting all that s/he seeks to leave behind in ‘new imaginaries of otherness’ and difference.44

This expanding middle class in Indian cities, defined primarily in terms of its consumption patterns, has emerged as a new ‘moral majority’, an ideological force which shapes to a very great extent the discourse on what India aspires to be like in this new era. Even though numerically they represent only a small part of the Indian population, they play a substantial role in defining what good education, healthcare and styles of life should be like, a trend which holds true as much for Kolkata as for any other city in the country.

In terms of education, in particular, the ability to learn and speak in English and possess a general command over the language has become one of the most sought after goals of this class; one which fits well with the new employment opportunities generated by the neoliberal climate.46 The relatively lacklustre school education policies in the state under the three decades of Left rule, and its rather delayed awakening to the changing demands in education, also simultaneously paved the way for the privatised education especially at the school level.47 Among other things, it created a homogenised understanding of what education should be like across classes, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds who, in conjunction to their efforts of achieving a comfortable middle-class-ness, appear to be convinced about the necessity of ‘good’ (which is usually always ‘private’) English-medium schooling for their children.

In Park Circus, only the affluent and the middle class Muslims, a small section of the local population, are in a position to provide ‘good’ English-medium education for their children. Schools like La Martinere, Don Bosco, Mahadevi Birla, Gokhale Memorial or even international schools such as the Cambridge and Calcutta International School which lie at close quarters yet boast global standards of education, are primarily for-profit institutions with an extremely steep

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fee structure. Even mid-range schools such as Our Lady Queen of the Mission, The Assembly of God Church, The Seventh Day Adventist Senior Secondary, Apeejay School and Saifee Hall lie well beyond the means of the average Muslim. Nonetheless, given the discursive constructions around an aspirational middle-class identity, many among the poorer sections of the neighbourhood’s Muslims have increasingly come to perceive private education in the English medium as the primary pathway to success.

As Nazima (43) a social worker who accompanied me on many of my excursions around the neighbourhood slums and a mother of two school-going daughters put it,

> It is not easy for us to send them to such a school [a local private English medium school affiliated to the ICSE board]....but at least they will learn English. That is very important....they learn (how to use) computers. They can get a good job when they grow up...

Nazima and her husband, who works as an assistant to a local real estate developer, have often defaulted in paying the school fees of her daughters. Once, the elder daughter had to be taken out of school in the sixth standard and could only resume her studies two years later through the intervention of the local ward councillor, who managed to access a trust fund which helped raise her tuition.

Many families in similar circumstances seem to be readily subjecting themselves to enormous uncertainties in order to provide a ‘good’ education for their children. Arifa Khatoon’s story further substantiates the point. Arifa, 37, is part of the local women’s self-help group and stitches school uniforms for a living. Her husband, a contract driver by profession, waits at the local matador stop everyday in the hope of finding work. Even though wages are good, work is irregular and he can count on getting contracts on an average of only three to four days a week. The couple, who live in a tiny two-room flat in one of the local slums, have three children – two daughters aged 18 and 16 and a nine-year-old son – all of whom go to various local English medium schools. Their monthly fees add up to a total of Rs 3100, apart from which there are

48 The term ‘social worker’ has gained in popularity in the new literature on everyday state where it is used to refer to those who while remaining outside of the party system act as brokers between the people and the local administration thereby facilitating locals access to the developmental state, See Paul R. Brass, The Politics of India Since Independence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
other extra expenditures to be incurred on transport, lunch and private tuition. Despite the seeming desperation of their situation, Arifa and her husband have strong reasons for their decision to educate their children in this way. As Arifa explained,

Such an education is almost impossible for us [to provide] but government schools are not good….there are so many problems, teachers don’t come, they don’t make students talk in English…..that is important. We are trying our best…..we cannot afford to give our children a college education, maybe, if they want to study commerce it’s okay. But if we could support them through to their twelfth standard they will at least find some decent job…… They can work in call centres; be front desk managers…they can even save and support their further education.

English-medium education in private schools seem to have become the only avenue for accessing upward mobility for sections among the neighbourhood’s Muslims who can ‘somehow’ manage to afford it up to the senior secondary level for their children. Even for those families which cannot, there remains a desire to provide such education at least up to the primary level to as many children as possible, after which they can move to apprenticeships which accept candidates with elementary education.49

7. Identities, Education and the Urban

Even though many urban Muslim families living on the edge think otherwise, opinions at the level of educational policy making vis-à-vis Muslims have still largely remained circumscribed within questions of identity. Two issues that have routinely figured in discussions on Muslim education in West Bengal concern the modernization of madrasa education and Urdu as the preferred medium of instruction. Debates around the necessity to improve madrasa education by bringing about changes in the curriculum to make it at par with mainstream education and expanding madrasa infrastructure to make them responsive to educational needs of ordinary Muslims have repeatedly found mention within successive state policies.50 Similarly, the institution of Urdu as a minority language and the setting up of Urdu-medium schools to cater to

49 Zakir Husain, “Analysing Demand for Primary Education: Muslim Slum Dwellers of Kolkata”, Economic and Political Weekly 20, no. 2 (2005): 137-47.
the requirements of Muslim students to expand their social capital have also cropped up routinely both within the academic literature as well as in official discourses on Muslim education in the city.\textsuperscript{51}

However, as recent enquiries have shown, only a small number of Muslim children actually avail themselves of madrasa education.\textsuperscript{52} Especially within urban centres such as Kolkata, the proportion of Muslim children attending madrasas is even less. In any case, few Muslim families sending their children to madrasas or Urdu-medium primary schools harbour hopes of decent white collar jobs for their children. The opening up of the madrasa curriculum in institutions affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education was a concerted effort undertaken by the West Bengal government, which was quick to respond to the madrasa question long before many other states even ventured into it. Nonetheless, rather than improving the lot of Muslim students from poorer and lower middle-class Muslim families, madrasas became sites where economically weaker sections from other communities such as lower caste Hindus and Scheduled Tribes (STs) became crowded together; a fact attributed to the generally dismal conditions of schooling available to disadvantaged groups in the state.\textsuperscript{53}

The implementation of Urdu as the medium of instruction in schools in Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods has been another area of contention. In keeping with the minority policies pursued by mainstream political parties, successive governments have progressively put an emphasis on the opening of Urdu medium primary and secondary schools in Muslim-predominated areas. This step, often referred to as ‘the ghettoisation of Urdu’ has once again gone against the aspirations of many ordinary Muslims for whom an exclusive Urdu education often becomes an impediment in the carrying out of everyday activities.\textsuperscript{54}

In Park Circus, while many Muslims across social classes seem to value the learning of Arabic for their children as a means of developing an appreciation of their culture and reading religious texts if they so desire, such learning is more often than not seen as a supplement to mainstream

\textsuperscript{51} Arshad Alam, \textit{Inside a Madrasa: Knowledge, Power and Islamic Identity in India} (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011).
\textsuperscript{52} Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, \textit{Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India}.
education. Each has its own relevance in its respective sphere; while English education is perceived as a necessity to participate in the social mainstream, Arabic becomes a medium of ensuring that cultural patterns of life are maintained.

While upwardly mobile families naturally seem to prefer mainstream education for their children, the aspirations are, as we have seen, not very different among the lower middle classes and sections of the slum-dwelling poor. The keen awareness of Muslim parents of the potential capacity of mainstream education to improve their children’s lives in terms of acquiring skills, training and manners and hence better job opportunities vis-à-vis madrasa education or even education in the Urdu medium has previously been explored by Jeffery et al. in the context of Muslims in Bijnor in rural Uttar Pradesh. Ordinary Muslims in Park Circus, especially those who find it difficult to afford English education for their children, point out that in West Bengal the relevance of Urdu education is indeed very minor, since all official paperwork is either in Bengali or in English. Given this, there is little to be gained by pursuing schooling in an Urdu medium school, other than learning Arabic, which can anyway bepicked up by going to the madrasa in the morning or to one of the many local maulvis. As Mansoor, 43, who runs a tailoring shop on Bright Street explained,

We are poor people….. You know how expenses have risen [lately]. How can I send my sons to English schools? Even Modern Day School [a modest English medium school] charges 800 rupees per month up to the eighth standard after which it increases even further. And there are several other expenses....But the government only talks of Urdu schools. They should open good English medium schools, with good teachers...so that even our children can get a good education. Learning Urdu will not help you get a job.

Azeem Khan, 39, a carpenter, whose family is originally from a district in eastern Bihar shared similar views. As he put it,

55 Surinder S. Jodhka and Katherine Newman have explored the ways in which factors such as English language skills, personal etiquette and grooming assume relevance in the hiring process beyond the criterion of qualification in their “In the Name of Civilization: Meritocracy, Productivity and the Hidden Language of Caste”, Economic and Political Weekly 42, no. 41 (2007): 4125-32.

This is not Hyderabad. Children need to learn to read and write Bengali…but these days even education in Bengali is not enough. You need to know English and computer for everything now. Then you can work as an accountant, a sales executive…. or even at a call centre. All of them require fluency in English.

At one level such responses highlight ordinary Muslim aspirations for a comfortable urban middle-class existence organised around ‘good’ education and respectable employment. At another, they also signal a shift in discourse from identity related concerns towards issues of development and increased access to the mainstream of social life.57

8. Educational Aspirations, Job Market Realities

Some of the key issues that emerged during the course of my interactions with the locals primarily derived from the depressing reality of state education in the city.58 Concerns ranged from the non-availability of good schools to the lack of state support for underprivileged children and the consistent dearth of well-trained and committed teachers – all of which resulted in increasing dependence on private education, which with its prohibitive fee structures seems to increasingly slip from the grasp of the average Muslim. As Md. Salim (42), who runs a van for school children, explained,

My daughter is in the seventh standard at the Girls’ School [the local government school for girls]. But her teachers don’t turn up regularly. Someday it is the mathematics teacher, other days it is the science teacher. We cannot go to the Principal and ask. They do not entertain such questions……whenever anyone goes to enquire…. they have invariably gone for this or that meeting….how is the child to learn?

58 Here it is important to point out that even though the literacy rates for Muslims have risen sharply (by 11% from 57.47 % to 68.78%) in West Bengal between 2001-2011 (the ‘Sachar Report’ based its data on the 2001 census), a fact often attributed to many of the central government’s policies for incorporating Muslims into school education, such a rise in literacy does not necessarily translate into ‘quality’. Saibal Sen, “Bengali Muslim Literacy Rate up 11% in a Decade”. The Times of India, 31st December 2015 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Bengal-Muslim-literacy-rate-up-11-in-a-decade/articleshow/50387020.cms accessed 1st September 2018.
He further elaborated,

The government says they have scholarships for us [minorities]. But look at the amount. You get only twelve hundred rupees a year and then you need to have five hundred rupees in the account. What is the point...Also you get scholarship only when you study in government schools. There are no scholarships in English medium schools (private schools).

Again, as many local Muslims pointed out, the details regarding scholarship schemes, availability of financial assistance, eligibility criteria and procedures for applying are beyond the knowhow of an ordinary person. For this, they have to depend largely on the goodwill of the political party workers or/and the social workers who might keep them informed if they manage to maintain good terms with them. As Rubina, 39, a mother of two, explained,

If you go and ask the councillor, she says ‘Don’t worry. You will be informed as soon as there is any news on that front.’ But then you can’t keep on enquiring forever....Imran [her neighbour’s son who works in a call centre] says they are all on the computer [i.e. the website] but how are we supposed to know?

Even though the West Bengal state government has recently announced a few schemes for disbursement of easy loans for higher education in the professional courses such as engineering, medicine and management and for extending scholarships for vocational training for youth, especially women, it still seems a long while before they are actually implemented at the grassroots level. At present, only a very limited number of people actually avail themselves of any of these schemes and given the existing nonchalance of the local administration, it is difficult to predict the extent to which policy initiatives will translate into practice at the local level. As I was told by a local level administrative functionary,

You are a researcher….Of course, you will be aware of such things.....but on the ground, realities are very different. Do you know the amount or the kind of work we have to do? It is impossible for us to look up what is available where and follow

59 Details of the minority educational assistance scheme can be found at the website of the West Bengal Minorities Development Commission. See http://www.wbmdfc.org/activity/scheme-overview.html. Accessed on 23rd August 2018.

60 See James Manor, Politics and State-Society Relations in India (London: Hurst, 2017).
them up. Of course if there is a circular or a discussion at the [mayoral] meetings we will take them up, but otherwise it is simply not possible.

In the near-absence of suitable state education, parents have no option than to turn to private providers. Even here, the almost hegemonic control of the middle classes in terms of defining the contours of ‘good’ education presents another major structural concern. Scholars such as Geetha B. Nambissan61 and Henrike Donner,62 among others, have very compellingly demonstrated the ways in which these classes, along with the state act as ‘co-producers’ of the urban educational reality, define what a ‘proper education’ should be like. Writing about the centrality of this rising educational ‘parentocracy’ in Kolkata, Manabi Majumdar63 has pointed out that it is only the upper and upper middle-class parents who have a sway over the school education system by dominating teachers and the school administration, and also by defining the parameters of ‘educational success’. Poor and lower middle-class parents, on the other hand, have little say beyond following a seemingly homogenised model handed down from above.

Many of my respondents pointed out that, besides the steep fee, getting children enrolled in any of the decent English-medium private schools around the neighbourhood means having certain social skills, ‘contacts’, the ability to pay ‘donations’ and also arrange for other kinds of assistance, both monetary and non-monetary. Salema, 29, who works as an anganbari cook (for a local school’s midday meal scheme) and herself dropped out from sixth standard from a state sponsored Bengali medium school, put it rather bluntly,

Thankfully my son’s name came up in the lottery…but the school also interviews parents. That is what we were most worried about. But my husband [who works as a book keeper at a local company’s office] can talk in English. So we managed…..the school keeps telling us to speak in English at home to develop fluency…..but how can I do it? My friend, whose husband is a mechanic, could not qualify in the interview round this year. So her son missed out despite the lottery.

62 Donner, “Whose City is it Anyway?”
63 Majumdar, Homogenized Educational Imagination.
‘Donations’ and non-monetary forms of assistance seemed to be common ways of raising money for these mostly for-profit institutions. Whereas in educational markets where the demand side is predominantly composed of rich and upper middle-class parents who are ever ready to maximally employ all kinds of resources at their disposal, both legitimate and less than legitimate, to ensure their children’s enrolment into prestigious ‘star’-rated schools, such requirements often become overly burdensome in scenarios where parents of meagre means scrimp and save to raise the required sum for getting their children. As Shaheen, 37, a seamstress who works with an NGO that supplies school uniforms operating out of locally held premises explained,

When I went to pick up the admission form, the Principal [name of school kept confidential at respondent’s request] on coming to know of my job enquired if I could arrange for a certain number of pieces of school uniforms every year at a lower rate….they sell uniforms along with the yearly package….I am only a worker; it is difficult to negotiate such things with didi [her manager at the NGO], but she helped. She met the Principal. The school has now admitted three of our children. And we work extra hours to stitch these garments….

Arrangements through the backdoor aside, the very fact of being Muslims and residing in a Park Circus further impedes their access to such schools. As Rehanna, 34, an ayah in a local nursing home, who has managed to get her son admitted to Modern Day School after a lot of hassle, put it,

….. with Muslims it becomes all the more difficult. They prefer Bengalis and Christians. They never come out with a clear list. If we enquire someone will come out and ask for the names of our wards and then come back and say their name is not on the list…

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64 Ibid. p. 326.
65 Since the larger part of poor and lower middle class Muslims in Park Circus is composed of migrant non-Bengali speaking Muslims, there is a tendency to conflate the terms Bengali and Hindu given the cultural preponderance of the Bengali-speaking Hindus in the city.
Even the few missionary schools which are around and which have English as the medium of instruction require the students to be Christians to be eligible for financial aid. This is yet another factor that prevents underprivileged Muslim students from joining such schools.

The gaps left behind by the inability of the state to deliver ‘good’ education to the underprivileged, coupled with urban middle-class imaginaries of what appropriate education should be like, has opened up space for the growth of a differentiated market within privately provisioned education. As evident in the case of Park Circus, this has resulted in the mushrooming of a number of rather dubious low-fee English medium schools geared towards a low-income market. Such schools tend to heavily compromise on infrastructure and quality of education. Officially unrecognised – since they fail to meet the standards laid down by the State Education Acts and the Right to Education Act (2009) – these schools nonetheless emerge in poor neighbourhoods where they evidently find a ready market. Such schools are also prone to frequent closures due to lack of funds and insufficient infrastructural facilities which can lead to a loss of an academic year, or in extreme cases, force students to appear as private candidates for the Board examinations, despite their families having borne the heavy burden of fees throughout the school period.

Another way in which privatised education has reached students from modest to low income backgrounds in the neighbourhood has been through the channel of private tuitions and coaching centres. Kolkata, especially, is known for the near universal dependence of all kinds of students, from mediocre to meritorious, drawn from across all sorts of social backgrounds and every level of schooling, on supplementary private tutoring to ‘succeed’ in examinations, thereby creating ‘shadow economies’ in education. While the discourse of ‘success’ shifts the focus from a rights-based view of education towards a choice-based view, where upper and middle-class understandings of good education based on ‘concerted cultivation’ predominate, ordinary

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Muslims of Park Circus rarely have the means to pursue such goals. For many, sending children to private coaching centres becomes an added burden they can ill afford to shed since in the absence of competent and committed teachers in schools, private coaching becomes the only way of ensuring their child’s ability to pass the examinations. As Salim explained,

The rates are so high… Till the eighth standard you pay fifteen hundred for Mathematics, Science and English. And after that it varies by individual subject. Maybe thousand rupees each…. How can one afford it?

The problem gets further exacerbated in the case of private English medium schools where many school teachers themselves offer private tuitions somewhere outside the school premises after school hours for an extra fee. Falling outside the purview of any state regulation that prohibits them from doing so (as is the case of teachers employed in state-run schools), private coaching becomes a lucrative business to many who usually receive meagre salaries from the institution. In such cases not attending private tuitions might often translate into extreme peer pressure and at times, poor performance in examinations, something which most children and their parents would want to avoid.

A notable feature in the field of education in Park Circus and its immediate vicinity concerns the emergence of ‘Model English Medium Schools’ aimed at students from Muslim families. Possibly an outcome of the dynamics of conscious neoliberal place-making on the part of affluent and upwardly mobile Muslims, these schools offer mainstream education along with lessons in Islamic theology. While following national level syllabi such as those prescribed by the CISCE (New Delhi) or the CBSE within highly up-to-date, technologically equipped settings comparable to any of the ‘star-rated’ schools in the city, they also advertise their ‘unmatched’ theology courses developed in consultation with leading Islamic scholars. These institutions generally have steep fee structures but appeal to those Muslim families who while being in a position to afford ‘good’ mainstream education for their children, are not necessarily averse to the idea of religious education when imparted alongside conventional education within the framework of formal schooling. Evidently such institutions are barely suitable alternatives for children from poor and lower middle-class backgrounds in the neighbourhood.

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Anasua Chatterjee  
Exclusion, Urbanity and Education

Given the existing shortage of accessible educational facilities, many among the poorer Muslims in Park Circus find it pragmatic to withdraw their children from school at an early age and put their children, especially their sons, into apprenticeships and vocational training courses. The persistent inability on part of Muslims to find feasible employment in the organised sector\(^70\) has turned instrumental skill development in sundry trades into far safer avenue of earning an assured and stable income. Thus picking up zari work, tailoring, carpentry skills from an early age or learning to drive, use computers and basic machinery or even work as mechanics, electricians and plumbers appear to be more realistic avenues for accessing livelihood for an average slum-dwelling Muslim. Though not comparable to wages in the organised sector these trades provide compensations a notch or two higher than totally unskilled manual jobs.

In the course of my interactions with the locals, I often came across the refrain ‘mussalman ko naukri kabhi nahi milega’ (roughly meaning ‘Muslims will never find employment’), a frustration all the more obvious in the context of the glaring lack of reservation benefits\(^71\) available to marginal Muslims as compared to Dalits and other backward social groups.\(^72\) While many families living in dire economic circumstances try to evade future unemployment by tapping the lower rungs of the neoliberal job market through ‘good’ basic education,\(^73\) many others, who are unable to ensure such education seem to opt for vocational skilling for their children from an early age to improve their chances of securing a livelihood. However it is perhaps too early to draw conclusions as to whether such trends have overtaken the positive evaluation of ‘good’ English medium schooling, since as evident from similar studies elsewhere, unemployed and underemployed Muslim youth in India often impute strong cultural values to education without immediately relating it to success in the job market, a fact that also points out

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\(^70\) ‘Organised sector’ refers to that sector of the economy where employment terms are fixed and regular and the employees get assured work. Enterprises in the organised sector are generally registered with the government.

\(^71\) Here the term ‘reservation benefits’ is used to indicate affirmative action policies with respect to education and employment that are available to a number of socio-economically marginalized communities in India. For an elaboration on how reservation policy worked vis-à-vis different communities see Rochana Bajpai, “Constituent Assembly Debates and Minority Rights”, Economic and Political Weekly 35, no. 21 (2000): 1837-45.

\(^72\) For the poor response of the Left Front government in West Bengal in terms of revising the OBC lists in the state to include previously left out marginal Muslim communities, as was done in other states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh after the Mandal Commission report, see Abhijit Dasgupta, “On the Margins: Muslims in West Bengal”, Economic and Political Weekly 44, no. 16 (2009): 91-96.

the resilience of the neoliberal rhetoric of development at the local level. Nonetheless the sense of deprivation generated by the growing deficit in social capital through education is evidently becoming only too visible among the poor and lower middle classes among the Muslims of Park Circus, with few pointers otherwise.

9. Conclusion

For the large sections of the city’s Muslims who reside in its numerous musholman paras, everyday reality is more often than not a series of negotiations where they grapple with prejudice, discrimination, socio-economic backwardness and mounting uncertainty within a rapidly altering urban milieu. At the same time, neoliberal conceptualizations of self-development and aspirations around a consumption-oriented middle-class identity have appealed to the ordinary Muslim just as they have to any other average urban dweller. It is within this context, that education, with its potential of increasing social capital and facilitating social mobility, has emerged as an important site of contestation. The paper has explored some of the issues arising around education by drawing on ethnographic narratives from the Muslim-predominant neighbourhood of Park Circus in Kolkata.

For most of the poor and middle-class Muslims of Park Circus, the twin factors of economic backwardness and socio-spatial stigmatization seem to come together to create peculiar patterns of educational deficit. Adults in most such families do not possess formal education above the school level, and whatever education they have is not well aligned with the demands of the neoliberal economy. Consequently, they have very little choice than to participate in the informal economy of the city where work is uncertain and wages low. Once out of the neighborhood, which itself does not provide much in terms of job opportunity, their spatial and religious identity stands as a further hindrance to their job prospects.

In keeping with the changing urban dynamic, most Muslims, despite their social class positions, seem to consider English-medium education in private schools as a possible pathway to success since it presumably opens up potentialities of participation in the emerging urban job market.

Nonetheless, such ‘good’ education is something they can barely afford. Prohibitive fee structures, absence of required ‘contacts’, requisite social capital often stand in their way. Often on the brink of desperation, large numbers of poorer Muslim parents are found to be taking enormous financial risks to send their children to schools which have come to represent the new educational ideal. The diversified market in English education, which has led to the growth of a number of low-key institutions, often of dubious intent, adds to the risks involved in pursuing education in such schools. While many attribute their plight to the inability of the state to meet the changing educational requirements of the poor, quite a few assign it to the sustained yet entrenched discrimination that Muslims encounter as a disprivileged religious minority in the city. For many therefore, faith in formal education has given way to decisions in favour of apprenticeships and upskilling of various types to ensure a decent, perhaps more dependable, livelihood. This does not however suggest an entirely negative evaluation of mainstream education; the latter continues to remain coveted, though often for reasons seemingly outside the requirements of job market-based rationality.

One might perhaps say that Muslims, especially the poor and lower middle classes among them, view their access to education – and through it to the city – using their own frames of reference where economic backwardness coexists with deep feelings of resentment resulting from the discrimination they experience, as well as a strong implicit desire to participate in the effervescent urbanity surrounding them. These factors contribute to their contradictory narratives around education and its usefulness in their lives which, in its own way, points to the multiple and complex negotiations around education itself through which members of this marginalised community attempt to lay claim to the city.
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