Farah Farooqi
Understanding Life and Education
in an Urban ‘Ghetto’:
Shafiq Memorial and Bara Hindu Rao, Delhi

Education & the Urban in India  I  Working Paper Series
Farah Farooqi

Understanding Life and Education in an Urban ‘Ghetto’: Shafiq Memorial and Bara Hindu Rao, Delhi
Abstract: This paper examines the running of an ‘(extra)ordinary’ school in a Delhi locality by sociologically situating it in its dense neighbourhood to revisit the category, ‘ghetto’. It traces processes of stigmatisation and stereotyping, relates these to the desperate but resilient efforts of residents to stand on their own two feet and probes the vexed relationship between the school, the locality and the children. The attempt is to grasp the impact of the sociology of the ‘ghetto’ on the children’s education, their mobility, and their ‘standing’ as emerging adults. This is achieved by showing the interconnections between the ebb and flow of employment, market-swings, the socio-economic and cultural structures of impoverishment, intercommunity conflicts, stereotyping and violence and the resultant reconfiguration of residences on sectarian lines. In so doing, the paper describes, analyses, even questions the production and reproduction of the new urban.¹

Keywords: Urban Education, Delhi, Ghetto, Muslims, Marginalisation

Farah Farooqi teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia. Her areas of interest are curriculum and pedagogic studies, school and community ethnographies, marginalisation and inclusion practices in communities, understanding schools as organisations and environmental studies. She has published widely in these areas. She served as an advisor on the textbook committee of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and was associated with the formulation and conceptualisation of the B.Ed programme in University of Delhi.

¹ This paper has been written in the present form for the first time. Some parts were serialised earlier in the nineteen articles titled ‘Ek School Manager ki Diary ke Kuch Panney’ in Shiksha Vimarsh (from 2012 to 2016). A glossary at the end of the paper explices specific terms used.
1. Introduction

Delhi can be regarded as an epicentre of political and economic power. It is not a homogenous community sharing a common identity or public culture. The socio-cultural and economic heterogeneity of Delhi is the hallmark of contemporary metropolitan experience almost anywhere in the world. It is also a city of contradictions! The segregation of citizens - into those living in Lutyen’s bungalows, in gated colonies, villas, unauthorised areas, slums, unsheltered on the streets – has become starker over the years owing to the economic liberalisation that has piloted social, political and cultural changes. Apart from this, repression, violence and consequential alienation have shaped relations in the public sphere, resulting in religious segregation of citizens. Muslims have been forced to live in ‘ghettos’ such as Jamia Nagar, Seelampur, Jaffrabad and many areas of the walled city. This chapter focuses on areas lying on the fringes of the Walled City – Qasabpura, Bara Hindu Rao, Ahata Kidara, Nabi Kareem and Nae Basti.

It is common knowledge that Muslims find it increasingly difficult to buy or rent houses in mixed localities.2 The areas I have mentioned above have undergone many demographic changes since 1947. The Muslim population in these areas grew after Partition riots in Old Delhi and Karol Bagh. The enrolment registers of the 1950s of the Shafiq Memorial School that I discuss in the following pages show that about 35% Hindu children studied in the school at that time. The areas housed many refugees after Partition, who slowly migrated to neighbourhoods where they were given plots for houses. Others moved out as their businesses grew. After the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, the Muslims were shaken, if not as much as the Sikhs. Many people from adjoining areas bought houses in these areas at that time. The pulling down of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and later the Gujarat genocide of 2002, gradually resulted in the present state of these neighbourhoods. The areas I have mentioned now have more than 95% Muslim population, leading to an illusion of security. Muslim consciousness, vulnerability and insecurity are overwhelmingly palpable in these areas since the advent of the right-wing, BJP-led government at the Centre in 2014. This is evident from everyday discourses and lives of residents of the areas. When the rising tide of hate and violence is surging against Muslims and other vulnerable groups throughout India, it is

important to understand the new urban and its relationship with the education of the marginalized.

I was the manager of the Shafiq Memorial School situated in Bara Hindu Rao near the Walled City in Delhi from 2009 to 2014. Later, I remained associated with the school as a member of its managing committee and continued to work with the children. Our school and two others were run by a society called the Delhi Education Society (DES) which was set up in 1951. A group of visionaries led by Dr. Zakir Husain, the erstwhile President of India, formed DES. It was to work for the cause of education in the Walled City of Delhi. Along with Dr. Husain, Prof. M. Mujeeb, Mr. Shafiqur Rehman Kidwai and Mr. M. M. Begg, among others, were the founding members of the society. Dr. Husain was also the Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia, a central university founded in the 1920s. The Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia also serves as the President of the Society in an ex-officio capacity. The Society envisages empowering the children and the youth of the community by providing an enabling environment and access to opportunities to grow as enlightened citizens of the nation. The school was run as a ‘madrasa’ much before the Society was born and is more than a hundred-year-old educational institution. The local people, many of whom are the alumni of the school, feel a sense of belonging to it. In various ways, the school reflects the demographic composition, culture and ethos of the surrounding mohullas.

The school has deep connections with the mohullas. This provided me a rare window to understand its social, political and cultural life and of the area in which it is located. My conception of my role as a manager required me to interact with students, parents and teachers, both formally and informally. I also visited the students’ homes and karkhanas (factories), took classes, helped them prepare skits, conducted workshops and officially communicated with the Department of Education, Delhi and the DES. I met members of the community, police officials and politicians residing in the locality. A glimpse of my journey with Shafiq is contained in my diary, published in the form of nineteen articles, as ‘School Manager ki Diary ke Kuch Panne’ in Shiksha Vimarsh, a journal published by Digantar, Jaipur, between 2012 and 2016, and also in other journals. In order to understand the

---

3 Mohullas refer to neighbourhoods surrounding the school, as mentioned above.
challenges faced by the students of the school, I look at the lived socio-cultural practices and livelihood opportunities in the surrounding mohullas. I begin by describing the inhabitants of the localities. The heterogeneity between different caste groups of Muslims gets masked by outward appearances such as the burqa, projecting them as a homogenous group. While focusing on the production of stereotypes, I raise the following questions:

- Do the caste-groups differ in beliefs towards Islam, rituals and trade patterns etc.?
- What is the reality of the stereotypes such as Muslims are unclean, ghettoised, dirty and dangerous?
- Do the processes of stigmatisation and labeling result in the community being forcefully imprisoned in ghetto-like spaces?
- Does this lead to the social and educational marginalisation of the community?

I produce for you, in this paper, the new urban comprising dense Muslim localities, deprived of basic civic amenities and hygiene and inhabited by people from various socio-economic strata. I show how electoral politics of vote are practised around identity and deprivation. A high percentage of residents of the area comprise first and second-generation migrants who have to constantly engage with uncertainties, income shocks and the vicissitudes of the market. These factors help me examine the life of the people as a rollercoaster ride in the city. I show how students of the school start working at an early age and get caught in the intergenerational cycle of impoverishment and deprivation. The area is inhabited by workers and their children who assist them. I therefore discuss:

- What are the livelihood-related challenges which impact the education and mobility of the children?
- Does the vexed relationship between the school, the locality and the children pull the children (and the community) down the socio-economic/educational ladder?

Seeking to connect all of these above-mentioned factors — the ebb and flow of employment, market-swings, processes of stereotype production, the socio-economic and cultural structures of impoverishment, intercommunity conflicts and violence and resultant reconfiguration of residences on communal lines — the article describes, analyses, even questions the production and reproduction of the new urban.
2. The Location
The entire area around Bara Hindu Rao, where the school is situated, consists of a crisscross web of narrow gullies (lanes) opening into broader lanes and roads. Apart from houses and karkhanas, small shops and khokas selling rotis, rusks, bakery items, meat and grocery etc. are located in these lanes. Some of these gullies are so narrow that it is difficult for two people to walk past each other. Mounds of garbage can be seen in the corners of these lanes. People and children walk past chatting, oblivious of the filth. At several places one can hear the metrical sound of machines, announcing a karkhana in the vicinity.

3. The Inhabitants
The people who have been living in this area for several generations — Muslims — see themselves as divided into three main biradris or zaats (castes): the Qureshis, who trade mostly in meat live in Qasabpura or Quraish Nagar and the Idgah areas; the Mirdhas, popularly known as tyre-wallahs, who live in mohullas adjacent to the school such as Chameleon Road, Mohulla Sheikhian, etc; and the Punjabi Muslims, who live in areas such as Beri-Walah Bagh, Bagheechey Achcheyji and Azad Market. Besides, there are the Ansaris, who live in Gali Darziyan and are scattered in other areas as well. The Ansaris were traditionally weavers. When their trade suffered in the Ganga plains in northern and eastern India, many migrated to Delhi and other bigger cities. The migrants from Bihar and other adjoining states constitute almost half the population of these neighbourhoods. Many of them are first or second-generation migrants. Besides these communities, the Saifi, Saqeqy and Faqeer biradris live in the adjoining mohullas. The Shia community of Shikarpur lives towards the pakki gali. Many of them are engaged in the glass trade. Since their total numbers, including those of influential and wealthy members, are fewer as compared to the rest, clout of the Shias is also limited.

There has been a gradual migration of affluent Hindus and Sikhs out of these mohullas and into middle-class localities across Delhi. Their space was taken up by Muslims, especially after the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the Gujarat genocide in 2002. The Hindus of the area live near Pahari Dheeraj, Filmistan and Chimney Mill. They have significant economic capital — most of them are employers and traders in the Sadar Bazar area in Old Delhi. Their localities are much cleaner. The mohullas where the Jains live have
gates at both exits. *Bastis* of the Dalit and Khatig people lie between Muslim areas such as Quraish Nagar and the higher caste and Hindu localities such as Pahari Dheeraj, located on the outskirts of the area. The three well-known *biradris* of the area — the Qureshis, the Mirdhas and the Punjabis — are described here. Struggles of the migrants from adjoining states are also discussed. I have described the Qureshi *biradri* more extensively in comparison to other *biradris* as the community was in the eye of a storm with the coming to power of the Right-wing government at the Centre in 2014 and also in several states. The meat trade suffered and along with it, the community. I describe here how this has had a bearing on the education of the children. I have interspersed the description of the *biradris* with profiles of a few children. These profiles do not represent the children of these respective caste-groups fully but nevertheless help in understanding the struggles and aspirations of some children to access education. In order to gauge the social reality of the worker children, it is important to look at the interplay between factory, residence, the school, the vicissitudes of the market, and the support system.

4. The Qureshis

The butchers of the Qureshi community live in Qasabpura and the Idgah area, less than a kilometre from the Shafiq School. This old habitation, more than a century old, used to be constituted of seven villages — Raqab, Sheedipura, Baragaon, Chhoti Mandi, Chhata, Chowk Gaon and Bayana. People involved in the meat trade from different parts of North India lived in these villages. The regional differences have erased over time and almost all the people recognize themselves as Qureshis. This area was once on the margins of Shahjahanabad. Owing to urban expansion, this population, still marginalised, no longer lives on the physical margins. Qureshis assert that they belong to the Quraish tribe of Arabia which gave shelter to the Prophet when he migrated to Madina. For the community, the word *Qasai* should not -- and does not -- denote *biradri* or caste. It should simply connote occupation. While other people label them as dangerous and stereotype, such as ‘they pull out knives at the slightest provocation‘, the Qureshis see themselves very differently. As we went around the *mohulla*, a gentleman proclaimed, ‘I was in the Intelligence Bureau earlier, I discovered that our locality has the lowest crime rate’. Another said, ‘Women and girls can walk the lanes at 2 in the night’. I found that though drugs and alcoholism are on the rise in the entire area which is associated with petty crimes, yet people of the area leave their main doors open.
When I took up the position of school manager in 2009, one-hundred-year-old slaughter houses were shifted to Ghazipur *mandi* (a wholesale market), 25-30 kilometres away from Idgah–Qasabpura, a result of the Supreme Court orders, the court ostensibly operating from the ‘neo-liberal praxis of aesthetics, safety, health and hygiene’.

The people of the area were passing through a difficult period and thousands lost work. The trade suffered. Such income shocks are the hallmark of the area. The sufferers were mostly labourers who had to spend a considerable amount of money travelling and their net earnings were barely two to three hundred rupees a day. There is a small percentage of the well-off amongst the Qureshis who saved their people from starvation during this period. The school, too, waived the fees of a number of Qasabpura children. Despite this, some children left the school, taking up petty work to support their families. Since the cattle *mandi* had been shifted from this ‘residential area’, marginal meat-traders continued to work stealthily from here, and students of the school became part of this trade under these circumstances. Buying goats from the *mandi*, transporting them to the area, slaughtering them, and selling the meat often brought the children and their parents into conflict with the police.

Work and the economic condition of the community have deteriorated since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government came to power in 2014. The community feels that their economic base has been deliberately targeted. They repeatedly used the word ‘organised conspiracy’ for what has ensued. With the beef controversy, the area remains under surveillance and in a state of panic because of rumours and false reports. The procurement and renewal of licensing has been strictly enforced since 2014. This is not just a tedious process but bribery and exploitation mar the entire practice. Those engaged in the business of livestock made much larger profits earlier but now they are suffering the most. The transportation of livestock involves many risks and hurdles. According to the traders, rules for transportation existed earlier as well but were not executed so stringently. Earlier they could easily transport 300 to 350 goats in a truck, though the allowance was only 40 per vehicle. But now, if caught, they are beaten and a huge fine is levied. The traders report that if they spend so lavishly the cost of meat will go up exponentially. The Cruelty to Animals Act has been in force since 1960 and was amended several times, last in 2017. The Qureshis commonly believe, ‘Maneka Gandhi’s goons now rule the roads’. When caught, their

---


6 Maneka Gandhi is a BJP Minister of Parliament and an animal activist.
livestock is confiscated and auctioned against their will. Those who stealthily slaughter and sell in Qasabpura have to pay heavy fines every now and then. The MCD officials formally fine them for one animal, pocketing the ‘fine’ on the rest of the cattle.

Describing the current state of the Qureshis, a gentleman painfully whispered, ‘It remains concealed. People wearing sparkling white clothes, seemingly well-to-do, sit like dogs ready to pounce on whatever little work comes their way in order to feed their children’. Some people have withdrawn their children from ‘good’ private schools such as Columbus and Cambridge and have now enrolled them in government and government-aided schools. Misery and hardship make people sensitive to discrimination and exploitation. A person pointed out, ‘Did you see there is just a single government school and no dispensary or a community centre in the whole of Qasabpura? There are, however, four police posts in a single lane connecting Ahata Kidara with Quraish Nagar’. The gentleman further added that the education level of the Quraishis, which was showing improvement before 2014, is again sliding down. While there is almost one hundred percent enrolment of the community children, only about thirty percent study beyond school. The percentage of those who manage to pursue education in regular colleges remains minuscule.

I have known Shahzeb, an alumnus of our school, for several years now. When he was at Shafiq, he was very interested in his studies. His peers often teased him for his attempts at speaking broken English. But he never gave up trying. He used to participate in every co-curricular activity. Despite all his motivation and hard work he could not continue his studies after school. His father’s health deteriorated and he and his brother had to support the family and financially contribute towards his father’s treatment. Shahzeb now goes to the Ghazipur Mandi where he arbitrates the sale of livestock. For mediating the sale of one goat, he gets one rupee as commission. He is able to earn Rs. 200 to 400 per day and nine to fifteen thousand per month. He is required to keep accounts and knowledge of his school subjects (which included accounts) has helped him in this. His day starts with the Fajir prayers at 5 am. He leaves for the Mandi immediately afterwards in a van hired by a group of people who trade in meat. Depending on the work, he returns between 12 noon and 2 p.m., has his lunch, and rests for a while after the zohar namaaz. Most days, he stays back in the mosque after the asir prayers till the maghrib or at times even till the Isha’ a namaaz. He likes attending the taleem which takes place during this time each day. He was always religious, now he sports a beard and a cap.
5. The Tyre Biradri

The tyre *biradri* consider themselves to be natives of the area. Some older people share that their community lived in Daryaganj and shifted to this place after the Rebellion of 1857. Some members migrated to places in Western Uttar Pradesh such as Meerut. The rich of the community are involved in the tyre trade and are earning well. The economically weak of the community work for the rich and in other small factories.

Since they are old inhabitants of the area, they have more property as compared to people who have migrated later. They have built and rented out small rooms to people, mostly workers, which fetch them good rents each month. The price of property in this dense locality is very high. The rents are also soaring in comparison to cleaner and less dense localities nearby. Many, such as Haji Tamkeen, are involved in both the tyre business and property dealing. A tall building adjoining one of the walls of the school belongs to him. Small *karkhana*-cum-homes are rented out to recently migrated people. Several people revealed that many workers had died in a huge fire in the building few years ago. In order to escape smoke and fire, many had jumped into the school ground and died. This incident points towards the risky and precarious conditions in which many inhabitants of the area live. The entire area, in order to accommodate the new residents, seems to be perpetually under construction. Small rooms on top of one another and a mesh of wires hanging on top in narrow lanes is the hallmark of the area.

Many from the *biradri* are able to afford good private schools for their children but most do not study beyond school and get involved in their respective businesses. Iqbal belongs to the tyre *biradri*. I taught him in class VIII for about four months. He used to come to the school for two to three days per week. When I asked him about this, he sheepishly told me that he has to peddle tyres in different streets. He candidly added that he cannot afford to attend school more than three times a week. He had an ailing father and he needed to help his older brother in the business. I later found he had dropped from the school. He rejoined in class IX after a gap of two years. I found him dressed in a neat, ironed uniform. He seemed happy. He told me that their business was now steady and his brother encouraged him to rejoin school.
6. The Punjabis

The affluent and economically comfortable people are in the Punjabi biradri as compared to the two discussed above. They have formed an Anjuman or organization which is involved in many educational activities. It also helps members in various ways such as offering them interest free loans. They run several maktabs (elementary schools) and ‘madrasas’ in the locality and a charitable dispensary and hospital. The wealthy choose to send their children to good private schools outside the locality. Many in the biradri are businessmen and support not just each other but other needy people of the locality. They consider and project their identity and culture to be not just different but also superior to other groups. A few have shops in Chandni Chowk and Connaught Place. The biradri even has its separate burial ground close to the Filmistan intersection, which is one of the most-maintained graveyards in the city.

One day, before the month of Ramadan, I was sitting in the principal’s office when a gentleman arrived. He was a parent and had come with a request to allow his child a month’s leave so that the child could devote his time fully to Ramadan activities. Since the child was hafiz, he was obligated to recite the Holy Quran in the Taraweeh namaaz in the evenings. When I tried to reason that the child would miss a month’s studies, both the parent and the Principal looked surprised at my sacrilegious comment. The principal politely said, ‘Ma’am we do not refuse leave in such cases’. The father added, ‘Madam, my son would join the family business later. I only want both my sons to somehow complete their graduation so that I am able to tell their in-laws that they are B.A. when I go to ask for their daughter’s hand in marriage’. I was told that they have a flourishing business of topis and caps which the sons are expected to look after.

7. Divergence and Convergence

The three Muslim biradris differ from each other in their beliefs related to Islam. The tyre-biradri follows the Barelvi sect. They believe in rituals like milad, vaaz and urs. The Punjabi biradri considers the former’s values to be ‘incorrect’ and some of the attendant practices to be bidat, which means ‘un-Islamic innovations’ or polluting orthodox Islam. The Punjabi biradri interprets Islam in the light of the Quran and Ahadees (narratives about the life of the Prophet, plural of hadees). Religious beliefs are also changing with time. Some of those
following the Barels have now adopted the Deobandi viewpoint under the influence of the Tablighi Jamaat. The three biradris differ in rituals and everyday practices as well. Marriages take place within the biradris, but not between them. A difference in beliefs and rituals is quite evident. Amongst most Punjabis, weddings take place in mosques and later a reception is hosted by the groom’s parents. Following the path of Ahadees, no dowry is taken and the brides’ parents are spared of spending hard-earned money on weddings. On the other hand, amongst the tyre biradri and the Qureshis, weddings are a lavish affair. Each person tries to outdo the other in showing off their wealth and pomp. A philanthropic gesture by the rich of the tyre biradri includes communal weddings. Thirty to forty couples are wedded in a single gathering and given necessary items as gifts to start their home together. This tradition is believed to have been started by Mufti Samar Dehlavi.

Among the Barels, which includes the tyre biradri, a huge procession, from Pahari Dheraj to Fatehpuri and Jama Masjid, is taken out on the occasion of Milad-un-Nabi (the Prophet’s birthday). Naat singers are invited from all over India and food and sherbet is distributed on the way by the wealthy. A committee is formed and contributions are taken from the biradri. Before the procession starts, political leaders are invited to shed light on the Prophet’s life and teachings. In previous years, former chief ministers of Delhi such as Sheila Dixit and Arvind Kejriwal have spoken on the occasion. The Punjabi biradri and others belonging to the Deobandi faith assert that these rituals have been copied from the Hindus and ‘polluted’ Islam. The Barels claim that these help in reviving the lost spirit of Islam and bring people together. Nothing, of course, can be affirmed as correct or incorrect. Some may say, हक़ीकत रिवायत में खो गई, यह उम्मत खुराफ़ात में खो गई (The reality has been lost in tradition, this community has been lost in mischief), but it is a matter of faith and an interesting interplay of jadidiyat (modernity), riwayat (tradition), rafaaqat (companionship), tanaza (conflict) and harkat (movement or change). For all the three communities, however, the Quran and Haddees are the founding texts. Each of these sects has its own historical trajectory and respective reasons for practice which links present forms with the past.

People and biradris remain critical of not just each other’s faith but have other misgivings as well. It was shared with me that the Punjabis are ‘professionals’, who allegedly do not even offer discounts to their brothers. Punjabis call the Barels kafir. At times, there are reports of scuffles between residents of Bara Hindu Rao and Qasabpura, also between Shia-Sunni children of the school.
8. The Migrants

At least 65 percent of parents of the school are those who have migrated to Delhi within the last two decades for the sake of work and educational opportunities for their children. Many of them live and work in the Nabi Karim area. Most are engaged in the manufacture of bags, purses, diaries and belts. Several belong to Madhubani, Darbhanga, Sitamarhi and Champaran districts of Bihar, but some are also from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Some have their own manufacturing units, but most sell their labour to *karkhanas*. A few are financially ‘comfortable’, while most are on the breadline. They support each other in this far-off land and maintain a distance from those who are settled here for the last many generations. They say: ‘These Dilliwalas sport decent clothes but mouth such abuses, we keep away from them.’

The labouring poor, whom I speak of, gained some stability after toiling for a few years. In Nabi Karim, 15 to 20 percent of the houses are now owned by people from Bihar. Their dwellings may just be a room, doubling up as a *karkhana*, but to have one’s own roof is a great blessing in a city like Delhi. Water is scarce in these areas, the supply of electricity remains erratic, and roads are under perpetual repair. Many people have also bought houses in Sarai Khalil, a comparatively cleaner location that boasts of government flats. At times the original inhabitants are worried: ‘These Biharis are progressing fast; they arrive in a wretched, pitiful condition but slowly they move on.’ When a child from Bihar was killed in an accident, a ’local person’ was blamed. When the ‘local’ people parleyed with a politician for protection, the migrants organised a protest at Jantar Mantar. The culprit was finally arrested. The locals consider themselves to be the ’original inhabitants’. While they keep reminding the new inhabitants of their ‘visitor status’, newcomers quietly resist their aggression and try to gain some ground.

I had visited Irshad’s home-cum-*karkhana* for the first time when he was in Class V. One day when I met him in school, he invited me for lunch which I politely declined, but had tea with him and his brothers. The dimensions of the house were 10x12 ft. A belt-making *karkhana* was installed there. A plastic sheet was spread on the floor where everything from working and cooking to sleeping took place. A sewing machine was placed on one side. Near it was kept the machine for grating leather. Raw material was piled up in a corner and packing of the finished product was being undertaken. When I looked up, I saw four or five strings tied across the room. Belts were hung on these for drying after being dyed. A fridge was kept in a corner. A small gas stove and a cylinder for cooking food were there in the room. A few cans containing water were kept near these. Some attempt had been made to put
things in order to welcome their ‘esteemed’ guest. On one side of the plastic sheet, a clean bed cover was spread on which I sat down. The rent of this room was Rs. 3500 excluding electricity charges which were nearly Rs. 1500 rupees per month. A single toilet was shared between occupants of many such rooms which mean it was used by forty to fifty people.

The brothers were packing belts even while talking to me. Four brothers live and worked in this room. The older brothers Naushad and Shamshad devoted all their time to the work. Irshad and Dilshad together shouldered household responsibilities such as cooking food, washing clothes and utensils etc. Along with this, after coming back from school, they devoted some time to the karkhana as well. When I visited them, a cousin who had come to Delhi in search of work, was also staying with them. There was a chain-like pattern of migration. Irshad’s elder brother Naushad was called to Delhi by his brother-in-law. Later, banking on him, many of his close and distant relatives came to Delhi. According to Naushad, ‘Most people in the Nabi Karim area are ‘outsiders’, only a few are ‘locals’. All help each other, the environment is good’. Irshad is now in class VII and Dilshad in class V.

Naushad said, ‘The life of outsiders is full of misery. They are dependent on others for every little thing. They are deprived of decent food and the water supply remains erratic’. He further said, ‘We have a short life. The doctor says blood burns out on staying up till late. We people toil from nine in the morning to two-thirty in the night. Educated persons have a different story; they only have to use their pen. But, for getting educated one has to bear a lot.’

It was not just an empty dream; Naushad was, in fact, making a huge effort to educate both his brothers. He had engaged tutors for them and advised them to visit libraries. He said, ‘It is important to study and reflect on books for gaining knowledge’. For this reason, he sometimes even purchased an Urdu newspaper for his brothers.

Naushad added, ‘If at all Irshad and Dilshad have to do manual work they should work on heritage crafts as it is related to education. If they themselves work, they will develop respect for manual labour and for those who work with their hands. They will not have an inflated ego which Allah dislikes.”

Despite his efforts, he was worried about his brothers’ education. He shared: ‘I have to somehow educate them both. Otherwise people will say, ‘he took away his brothers for manual labour, not for their education’. They will make the family proud if they get educated. This is what my plan is’. After a few years, Naushad started a new karkhana for manufacturing school bags. Now his younger brothers take care of the belt-making unit while he is ‘nurturing’ the new set-up.
For the world beyond this ‘ghetto’, these heterogeneities and conflicts are masked under the label of ‘Muslim community’. Moreover, the people of this area have internalised the responses of dominant groups and the media. Hence, they are compelled to take refuge in this locality, called chhota Pakistan (Little Pakistan) in some circles. People living in the area find comfort and freedom to practice their religion and rituals openly. It is said that they can together celebrate festivals and other occasions. It is also said, ‘At least four ready shoulders will be found to carry us to the burial ground’.

9. The Processes of Othering and Production of Stereotypes
The entire area remains under high alert during any communal clash anywhere in India. Whether it is the national days such as Republic Day and Independence Day or other major festivals, extra police force is deployed in the area. The perception of Muslims as trouble-makers remains persistent. There have not been many cases of rioting in the recent past. Rioting last took place in the area on 15 November 1990 when the news of Kar Seva having taken place in the Babri Masjid on 30 October 1990 reached the area. Muslims and Sikhs took out a peace rally from Gurdwara Sisganj to the Old Idgah. It is alleged that on that day, Muslims raised provocative slogans while Hindus resorted to brick-batting. All this happened after the visit of a few Right-wing politicians to the area. The residents of Qasabpura angrily alleged that police openly sided with the Hindus during the skirmishes. On my recent visit to the area, people cribbed that they have to be extra careful now as it is ‘their government’ which is in power. I was told that in 2018, on the occasion of Ram Navami, the Hindus organised an elaborate procession. People carrying swords and shouting slogans marched the lanes while the annual ijtema was underway in the Old Idgah. Residents of the mohulla shared that they had no option but to restrain themselves from reacting to provocative slogans lest the situation went out of control.

While living together in the ‘ghetto-like’ locality gives people a sense of security, they also reinforce each other’s fears. One hears complaints about systematic and conscious targeting of Muslims by stigmatising them and then implicating them in false cases of hooliganism and rioting. One often hears people say, ‘God forbid if riots happen, then both the police and the judiciary will accuse Muslim boys and implicate them in false cases’. Hence those living in the locality thank god for whatever little space they are able to afford in this dense and filthy neighbourhood. Cases of picking up of Muslim boys for interrogation
have been reported from the area. Also, news of police excesses and state-sponsored violence from Muslim majority areas such as Muzaffarnagar, Shamli and Batla House sends shivers down the spine of the residents. Such instances of repression and violence shape relations in the public sphere and civil society.

As I have mentioned earlier, many Muslims migrated to this dense locality after the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. Several tyre shops owned by Sikhs in the Chimney Mill area, close to Filmistan, were looted and burnt down. The Muslims saved several others from a similar fate. A shop selling paints and oils, close to the Qasabpura, was stopped from burning by the local people. The meat traders who had helped, now joke, ‘Sardarji used to fight and abuse us if we parked our vehicles in front of his shop. But he has become kind-hearted since then, never raises his voice and is always courteous towards us’. Dalits and Hindus of the area, involved in the violence, raised slogans like, ‘Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai, yeh Sikh qaum kahan se aae (Hindus and Muslims are brothers, from did this Sikh community arrive)’. Muslims residing in the area continue to proclaim, ‘Inka roti - beti ka saath hai, jab inhein nahin chhoda to hamein kya chhodeingey? (They have ties of bread and marriage. When they did not spare them, why will they spare us [i.e. the Muslims]?)’.

This does not mean that people remain isolated from the Hindu communities. Work brings them together. In many cases, employers are Hindu while employees are Muslim. They share good relations though these are mainly patronising. A young person commented that inter-religious conflicts in the area are unthinkable because of economic relations between people. He further added, ‘The entire economy of Sadar Bazar will crumble if some untoward incident happens’. Many people are great friends with each other; some families have had harmonious relations for several generations. Taking a deep sigh, they proclaim, ‘Our leaders are the cause of all conflict between people. Things were never this bad’. Danish shared, ‘Just outside my window, close to my house, we have a family which sells milk and milk products. Every other day bhaiyya invites me to have kada milk (thickened milk). He knows I am very fond of it’. We know it well that the media has managed to project Islam and its adherents as extremist, fundamentalist, bombers and terrorists. In fact, an impasse is projected between the religion and the religious on the one hand and the idea of secular and liberal people on the other. The categories -- religious and liberal – show the relationship of people to ideas, ethical codes, interpretations and communication in general. Thus, a singular normative idea of the secular is problematic in a multi-religious country like India. The selfhood embraced by people of the area is of Muslimness informed by minority consciousness but it is not radical.
At the heart of the ‘ghetto’ where the school is located lies the amalgam of discrimination and fear. The feeling that Muslims lack resources and education and that institutions such as the police and judiciary are against them is widespread amongst children and adults, rich and poor, netas and commoners and is also reflected in the topography of the ‘ghetto’. A multi-layered discourse of fear is seen engraved in everyday imagination and conversation. This is reflected in a secret passage which a mill owner allowed to be built on his property near the school. He reflected, ‘God forbid, this will prove to be useful in situations of curfew or riot’. A local politician was invited to unfurl the flag on the occasion of Independence Day. In his speech he said, ‘If someone says to you that this country is not yours, then don’t get convinced. Our fathers and forefathers are buried here. They have sacrificed their lives for the country. This is our nation just as it is theirs...’

Adults have passed down the sense of fear to children. I taught a chapter on marginalisation given in their NCERT textbook, Social and Political Life, Part III, to students of Class VIII. Some of the responses of the children pertaining to the manner in which Muslims are constructed and discriminated against include:

‘Villains in films are shown as Muslims’.
‘If there is a bomb blast somewhere Muslims are first to be named’.
‘Once my neighbour was looking for a job; members of other communities were unwilling to give her a job. When she got one, she had to undergo a lot of humiliation. Is being Muslim a sin?’
‘When Muslims were subjected to atrocities and cruelty in Gujarat no one came forward to help them. This happened because no Muslim in Gujarat had any government job.’

A number of research studies support the premise that children who perceive discrimination and bias may feel discouraged to strive and struggle for academic success as this contradicts the image of education as providing equality of opportunity. This needs to be examined as one of the factors in the glaring dropout rates amongst Muslim children as observed by the Sachar Committee Report.

---

The **mohullas** are a good example to study how stereotypes, phobia, fears and criminality is constructed. I learnt that stereotypes may have a basis which most often is perceptually skewed. Muslims are considered unclean – the dense **mohullas** are ‘proof’ where piles of garbage are seen accumulated in every nook and corner. The municipal corporation cannot keep up with garbage generated in the area. The houses-cum-**karkhanas** of the workers cannot be called clean by middle-class standards. Several of these one room workshops have one toilet which stinks because it is used by more than thirty people, as mentioned above.

Hardships and income shocks do not allow people to have peaceful family lives. In some places, women and children are running households by doing piece work such as packing of materials as men have lost work due to closure of **karkhanas** and slaughter houses. Even if **karkhanas** are running, the income remains uncertain. When this happens and women and children gain some decision-making powers, leaving patriarchs feeling disempowered. This leads to conflicts and quarrels in families. In some families it reaches a limit where the patriarch leaves his home, wife and children. Muslim men are anyway constructed by communal minded Hindus as cruel who pronounce **talaq** at the slightest pretext!

The Tablighi Jamaat is quite active in the area. People from all the three biradris and other residents including some children of our school are associated with it. Taleem is given in many mosques of the area between **asir** and **maghrib** namaaz or after **isha’a** prayers. Tabligh is mostly concerned with ‘proper’ interpretation of religious obligations such as **namaaz**, **roza**, **zakat** etc. It also tries to retrieve such aspects of religion which have a direct bearing on everyday aspects of life such as taking care of neighbours and cultivating politeness. Association with it gives people a sense of piety and being a part of a valued group. I found many young adults adopt Islamic symbolism in attire. Beard, kurta-pyjama and **topi** give them a feeling of oneness with a ‘respected group’. At times, this also facilitates business associations. Being a part of the unorganised sector, without any trade unions, people need to build relationships of trust and friendship. Adopting symbols and rituals as well as meeting as part of a religious group helps in forging a collective identity and good relationships between members. However, kurta, pyjama and skull-cap remain degraded markers, identifying people as uneducated, backward and radicalised fundamentalists.

I found that illegality and criminality can be exclusive categories if seen closely and compassionately. Many people in the area would not be able to afford to eat more than once a day if they did not steal electricity. Moreover, children below fourteen years of age work in **karkhanas**, which again is illegal. Every now and then one hears of police raids. Giving **hafta**
to the beat officer comes in handy as they inform the factory owners in advance! Fights between people on non-payment of rent and debt are a common sight. Butchers of Qasabpura who work hard to earn their halal rozi but do not have licences are rounded up and fined. Rare incidents of pick-pocketing are also reported from the area. Acts of destitution and despair are easily constructed as criminal by the institutional mechanisms of police and judiciary.

10. ‘Trading’ of Votes
A complex web of people lives in the mohullas around the school. This consists of workers, businessmen, service providers, traders, brokers-contractors, the poor and the rich, politicians, and social workers. The Residents’ Welfare Associations (RWAs) are important actors in any local situation and the police and the press are never far away. Cooperation, clashes, conflicts, selfish interests and politicking, all of these come into play. At times the school gets caught in this web. You will find boards bearing the names of RWA members installed at the entrances and exits of lanes. The work that happens in the mohullas brings people into conflict with the police every now and then. Even now one hears, occasionally, that a karkhana has been shut down on allegations of pollution. As mentioned earlier there are different types of karkhanas manufacturing machine parts, tools, equipments, wires, etc., which consume a lot of electricity. The local people report that it is almost impossible to make any money through the karkhanas without stealing electricity. We know the government provides electricity at subsidised rates to big capitalists such as the Tatas and Ambanis in the special economic zones. In this locality, however, the electricity bill of a karkhana may at times be overblown to lakhs of rupees. In order to rectify this, the people lure and bribe the police and entice the politician through feasts. Furthermore, there is a lack of services in the area. Even for basic necessities such as water, electricity and hospitalisation, one has to pay obeisance to politicians. The intermixing of ‘white’-‘black’ and profit-loss in businesses escalates the need for escaping from the clutches of the law and the police. Rallying round politicians for appeasing them becomes necessary. The politicians know all this well. If work happens through them and the institutions obey their directives, then through the RWA and the social workers they can establish linkages with the people. All, of course, for votes. When work gets accomplished, the rich of the area even organise a small felicitation for netaji, who obliges the crowd with speeches and words of wisdom.
Being familiar with the locality, I have realised that politicians who appear unapproachable to us may alight from their high perch to trap some ‘fish’.

The area is bursting at its seams. There is encroachment of even the graveyard. Tales of litigation, and of people moving in and out of lock-ups, are always in the air. Given the deprivations and drawbacks, the environment is ridden with conflicts and wrangles. There seems to be a flood of ‘social workers’ in the area, go-betweens, seeking to link the ‘rulers’ and the ‘ruled’. Instead of critiquing and pressurising the state and the politicians, they are busy concealing their excesses. Both the social workers and the politicians gain and grow at the cost of ordinary people. Obliging people is a source of votes. The ‘social workers’ are positioned at the right juncture, but instead of stirring the consciousness of the people, they stifle it. According to one of the school teachers, ‘They mentally enslave people. The poor fools’ throats become hoarse in shouting slogans in their praise’.

Social workers often visit our school as well. Once or twice a year, students from the school too come under their obligation when a politician distributes stationery, books and bags etc. to them. One day, the principal introduced me to a social worker. He said, ‘Madam, he is not like others. He has gently got many things done. We had requested him for computers which he has arranged through mantri-sahib. I received the letter of sanction today itself. He has got many things arranged through netaji’. Anyhow, things get done in the locality only through flattery and the lure of votes. Just before the enforcement of the code of conduct during the previous general elections, the computers reached the school. Along with the computers came the legislator, to deliver his speech, to cash the favour, to preside over thanksgiving and sloganeering. I too eulogised and garlanded netaji! Ironically, our political leaders charge each other of appeasing the Muslims! Our children get educated in politics but, sadly, petty-politicking as well.

Due to the dearth of role models some of our children look up to the people who have ‘made it big through short-cuts via netaji’! The netas oblige one or two out of thousands by signaling a few departments and institutions to give them tenders for A.C. fitting or cooler installation etc. Because of this monetary assistance, the poor people they have helped feel obliged to the netas and are likely to ‘gather’ votes for them in future elections.
11. Work and Education

About 65 percent children studying in the government schools of the area are engaged in some or the other form of work. Children as young as those in class III or IV start contributing to work. All around Ahata Kidara and Nayi Basti there are small factories manufacturing wires, small instruments and parts for use in machines, plastic toys etc. The glass-ware making and cutting workshops can also be found. These small factories are located in narrow lanes around the area. These karkhanas vary from 8x8 feet in size to bigger interconnected halls. In some places, bunker roofs have been raised to create more space. Young boys and men, with greased clothes and hands, can be seen working in these karkhanas. Some load raw material into the machines, others can be found packing finished products into cartons. Working for long hours in these small cramped places, hot even during winters, can be quite harmful for health though this work may not be classified under the hazardous category of work. Many such karkhanas were closed in the area during the sealing drive of the MCD in 2006. Many people came under heavy debt as their livelihood was snatched away. In 2018, the state of panic amongst the people was again palpable as 33 shops were shut down in the adjoining Qutub Road. Many people of the tyre biradri and other communities either rent out these karkhana spaces to people from Bihar and other adjoining states or run small factories themselves in these spaces. Some of these spaces double up as homes to the workers as well. Several of these, I found, were so small that all of the family could not sleep at one time. They slept in shifts. A few members worked while others slept and vice-versa.

I visited a diary-making karkhana located on the third floor of a building. The broken and dark staircase was hard to climb. The factory was a small rectangular room where machines, raw material, packing material, instruments and finished products were stacked in different corners. Ten boys were engaged in different tasks – sewing, packing, cutting etc. They were between ages eight to thirty. The eldest was the employer of the rest. He had hired them from his hometown in Bihar. Four of the boys were related to one another. The youngest, aged 8 and 11, went to the local ‘madrasa’ in the morning and helped in doing domestic and packing work in the evening. Two of their uncles, aged 23 and 25, also lived and worked in the same karkhana. All they could ensure was that their nephews regularly went to the ‘madrasa’. The uncles urged me to help them in getting the two youngsters admitted to a good government school in the neighbourhood. They said that they had brought the children along for the sake of education.
The uncles complained that the children were in classes III and V but had not learnt to read properly. This was a complaint of also other guardians whose children were going to regular schools. Apart from the low levels of engagement in schools, I realised it was difficult for the children to follow the kind of discipline and regularity that schools demanded. Many of the children took leave when work in the karkhanas mounted. While this has more affect in the foundational years, older children also suffer due to heavy curricular load. Textbooks, syllabi and assessments are skewed towards children from middle class families whose only work is to study. Apart from irregularity, the worker children and those from working class families do not have role models to emulate and form study habits. They also do not have environments that may facilitate learning at home. Their homes-cum-karkhanas and chaotic lives hamper a disciplined study schedule. Most guardians invest a lot by sending children for tuitions but unqualified teachers in low cost tuition centres do not support them much.

Even if the children are not contributing much time and energy to the economic activity of the family, the children’s life worlds and the adults’ life worlds overlap intimately. Though Irshad, his younger brother or their respective families may not consider what they routinely do as ‘work’, they nevertheless assist in small and big ways. If you ask younger children, most will innocently reply, ‘nahin kaam nahin kartey bus bazaar se khana, dhaagey waghera ladetey hein. Aur bartan dho detey hein’ (we do not work, we only get threads and food etc. from the market and wash utensils). The girls not only accept work such as washing, cleaning, cooking, as their responsibility but many also help in packing and putting beads on clips etc. The lives of these children, informed by the interface of culture and household economics, have taught them to be fairly independent in terms of taking care of themselves, managing everyday affairs and assuming responsibility. The descriptions of the settlements in the neighbourhoods allude to the impossibility of insulating children from ‘adult worlds’ of work and hardships. Here, childhood is not seen as a distinct and shielded phase of life by most families.9 The children too are aware that they do not have the leisure of carefree childhoods as their counterparts from well-off backgrounds do. Childhoods are inextricably linked to the socio-economic lives of the community and the family. Some have shared that parents start nagging them about employment when they reach high school, which attains a heightened pitch on reaching college.

There are other children learning a skill and earning an income in the process. Apart from craftsmanship, labour dynamics and social networks also need to be understood and

---

developed for succeeding in the market. A considerable part of the children’s day is spent in honing such skills and knowledge. It gives them and their families’ confidence in the children’s capability to earn their bread through the skills gained, if not through education. But none of these crafts are such that they cannot be learnt in adulthood with a few months or years of labour.\(^\text{10}\) Even so, looking at the resources and quality of teaching-learning processes in the school, it is difficult to tell these children to engage solely in studies for improving their future prospects. The board examination results of the Shafiq Memorial School enable only a few students to secure admission in regular colleges. Many children find their way forward through low-quality distant education courses, which only take them as far as the call centres. In this case, the children lack adequate skills as well as degrees and at best become slaves of multinational companies. The challenge of keeping up with changing technologies and skill requirements in these setups further jeopardises their futures. If the school and its counterparts in the area extend full support to their students, it will be appropriate to advise them to focus only on study. Ahmed Iqbal, who works in a karkhana, often shares how adult co-workers and neighbours tease him for his seriousness about studies, saying ‘Tell us what you will gain through studies?’

It is clear from the description of home-cum-karkhanas that most migrant families are engaged in the informal economy, where work happens on a piece rate basis. Entire families contribute labour to the household-run karkhanas. In the context of excessive supply of labour, piece rates are low in the value chain. The labour of the children involved in such household work --whether for a few hours or long stretches -- remains invisible at times. Thus, Burra argues that there exists a thin line between labour and working, and if we persist in keeping these lines intact, we will be doing a great disservice to workers in household enterprises, particularly women and children.\(^\text{11}\) Biggeri et al. point out that unless the returns from schooling are increased, the informal sector will continue to grow.\(^\text{12}\)

12. Is There a Way Forward?
A close examination and understanding of the different forms of work/labour performed by the children is possible by examining their social realities. While only a few children are


engaged in hazardous work, a larger number shoulder a considerable part of their families’ economic burden. These children put in many hours of work, sometimes stretching into the small hours of the morning. There is need for the state to intervene to keep them away from such work, but not just by declaring it illegal under the Child Labour Act 1986, which is an easy escape. Keeping in mind the socio-economic backgrounds of the children, the state needs to provide for them and their families’ economic protection so that the children do not have to work.13

Support provided by the school (and other children’s centres) should involve better educational facilities and special support for the ‘difficult’ subjects apart from improving the overall quality of education. This is needed to escape the vicious cycle of intergenerational impoverishment comprising low educational attainment, meagre wages and a return to child labour. I met young adults who complain that school education did not enable them to pursue higher education. They further lament that while they remained glued to schooling, many people of their age created a niche for themselves in the social ecology of the market. Yet, in the same breath, they point out certain advantages of education over their peers. This includes the ability to plan life and work in a systematic manner, competence to fill tenders and navigate through paperwork, confidence in networking, etc. Examples of successful business ventures of our alumni in the neighbourhood also illustrate superior entrepreneurial capabilities of people who have had the opportunity to complete their schooling. An ex-student of the school is an exporter of leather goods, including jackets, to West Asian countries.

Income shocks are prevalent and frequent due to market swings. The area also underwent drastic economic catastrophes when the Municipal Corporation of Delhi in 2006 sealed, or closed illegally running commercial ventures in residential areas. Later in 2009, slaughterhouses were shifted to Ghazipur Mandi. At the time of writing this paper, the butcher community was being harassed by the Right-wing government at the Centre. All this creates immense economic difficulties for the people. In such cases, socio-economic security and credit availability can play a role in deciding the children’s continuation in school and their advance to higher education.

With the emphasis of the central government on skill development and introduction of a vocational stream in schools run by the Delhi government, the disparity amongst the

societal groups and children is bound to increase further. The Shafiq Memorial School is planning to open a skill-based stream in the school. An ‘advantage’ of having such courses in the eyes of schools and the children is that these accord much greater weight to internal assessment in comparison to the traditional courses. So, children bother less about difficult areas such as Mathematics. If they pass in an additional skill-based course and fail in Mathematics or a Science subject, they still advance to the next stage because they have completed the required number of courses.

Though no systematic and regular medical checkup of the children used to take place, many children of the school, I found, suffered from weakness of bones and eyes. The children easily fractured their limbs on falling while playing. Parents reported that some of the children were undergoing treatment for spinal problems. Living in dark and dingy spaces without adequate sunlight is responsible for such problems. There is a need for regular medical examination of the children in schools in order to identify and treat such ailments.

Since the area is dense and intra-kinship bonds within communities are close-knit, women of all the three biradris have less of a chance to venture beyond ‘community boundaries’. Furthermore, their movements and behaviour are closely policed by their families and communities. In all the three biradris, girls are married off early and are rarely allowed to study beyond the local school. The arguments are, one, it will be difficult to find a match for them within the community as not many boys in the community have college degrees. And two, there is a lurking fear that if they venture out of the ‘ghetto’ and step into colleges then they may encounter and marry boys from other communities. ‘Gory instances’ of a few girls ‘eloping’ with boys are cited as evidence. Even so, the number of girls who are trying to access higher education amongst these biradris has increased over the years.

In many of the biradris not discussed in any detail in this paper, there is a culture of supporting girls’ education. Ansari and Chaudhary girls are accessing higher education on getting a chance. The same is true of the migrant families. For most of the families one of the reasons for migration to Delhi is education of children, including that of girls. There are some young primary school girls who live with father or brother while their mothers and other female relatives are in the hometown. Pursuing education is easier for girls whose entire families have shifted to Delhi. Some get into regular colleges while many continue to study through correspondence courses.

It is evident in the school that migrant children work harder than children whose families have been in the area for several generations. As mentioned above, an important reason for recent migrants to move to Delhi is education of children. The families of those
staying in the area for several generations have their own business ventures and traditions, however small. I found that people outside of the community may label or stigmatise butchers but they hold their work and community in high regard. The Qureshis know well the nitty-gritty of the trade and want to carry on with it in comparison to a low-profile, low-paying job which is the only option after school or even college. Since the children of labouring communities do not have the leisure of preparing for the world of work by attending schools and colleges like children from middle-class families, most are compelled to work either after school or at best after graduation.

Since in most biradris marriages continue to be arranged within communities, there are strong kinship bonds between families. The kinship bonds are also entwined with give and take or debt and credit relationships. At times people who work in one factory unit are relatives. This is true of the migrant families as well. A lot of importance is given to kinship ties. Festivals are celebrated together while births, deaths and other related ceremonies also provide opportunities for togetherness. On asking children the reasons for long absences from school, it was found they were visiting their maternal or paternal relatives for festivals etc. The children also take leave when work mounts up in their karkhanas. Both the children and their parents remain uninformed about the demands of schooling and related study habits. This is also a key factor in their educational underachievement. Some of the children with whom I was in touch after they passed out of the school complained, ‘Ma’am, we used to joke that if we do not get (admission) anywhere else, Zakir (Zakir Husain College, Delhi University) was there for us. But when the Class XII Board results were announced, we realised we were not even worth Zakir’. Another complained when I complimented him that since he wrote so well, why did he not take up Humanities in school, ‘Ma’am nobody was there to guide us, I am not doing well enough in Science and I now realise that I would have done better in Humanities’. There seems to be an urgent need to hold counselling sessions for the children. This includes career counselling. Counsellors need to be employed till the time the teachers become equipped to carry out this role along with their present duties.

The struggle of the community to access education is creditable. As noted above, many young children including girls live in karkhanas with male members of the family while their mothers and female members continue to live in hometown. They shoulder domestic responsibilities apart from contributing to the karkhana. I realised that the burden of carrying forward tradition and culture is also borne by the marginalised. In order to retain Urdu and its character, the school continues to have Urdu sections. Many of the children who want to opt for Hindi or English as the medium of instruction are admitted to the Urdu
medium sections. One disadvantage of this, according to their guardians, is unavailability of tuition in Urdu.

When I see the syllabus especially of the secondary and the senior secondary classes, I sometimes feel that the load is insurmountable for children of schools such as mine. Is it constructed with a conspiratorial purpose of ousting most children from quality higher education? Could we instead weave together a syllabus which helps children understand kinships, biradris, migration, displacement, economic exploitation, surplus appropriation, disciplines, norms, religion, politics, languages, games and culture surrounding them? And then make linkages between the local and the global. But we now have the option of vocational courses for such children! Will it not create more fissures in the society? If introduced, the syllabuses of such courses need much more thought so that the children who already are skillful learn more overarching skills and the capacity to critically question their circumstances.

Can a School Managing Committee, as proposed by the RTE (2009), help establish the crucial and critical link between the community and the school? This could open up an avenue for making multiple contexts and journeys a part of the school curriculum. There is a long way to go. We are still on the first step, which is of developing respect for the parents and the community and considering them an important link in the process of educating children. There remain tensions between the haves and the have-nots of the Muslims community as in other communities. While the school functionaries do not consider the community, whom they refer to as ‘jahils’ (uneducated), worthy of participation in school activities, the attitude of the former makes the parents deeply aware of the lack of respect due to their lack of cultural capital. The Delhi government has taken steps to make the School Managing Committees functional. In some of the schools run by the Directorate of Education, there appears to be a marked improvement in the overall environment due to the coming together of school and community. The government-aided schools, especially the schools situated in impoverished areas, also need to be included in the government’s ambit of activities so that the school system becomes more accountable to the children and the community. Apart from training the school personnel, the work force of the Directorate of Education needs to be educated and made sensitive about the needs of such special schools. I recall how an officer of the Directorate refused to visit Shafiq so that she could participate in the Departmental Promotion Committee. When I called her, she pointedly told me, ‘Hum aisee jagah par nahin jaatey hein (we do not go to such places)’. 
With Muslims being denied residence in ‘cosmopolitan’ localities, prejudice and polarisation between communities will grow and continue to breed intolerance and violence. At this juncture, it is important to ask whether schools can become sites of contact and interaction for children of different socio-religious, economic and caste groups. My experience of working in Jamia Millia Islamia, which boasts of heterogeneous population of students and staff, tells me that contact improves intergroup relations and understanding. The Sachar Committee Report also talks about common spaces for children and adults so that they overcome prejudicial stereotyping of each other.

A peep into the history of the school and the *mohulla* provides some exemplars. At the time of Partition when polarisation was at its peak, in order to build bridges between communities, a teacher of the school, along with his brother, started children’s clubs in the neighbourhood. These clubs were called *bal-biradris*. Children of all families and communities were encouraged to send their children to play games, read story books and engage in many other types of activities. Later, these clubs increased to about one hundred in number and were spread all over Delhi for a considerable period of time. I think we are at a similar juncture in history, with polarisation at a new peak, but this time to suit the political agenda of the state. With the kind of social distance between communities, can schools become such common spaces? Moreover, the politics of today can use education to establish socio-cultural and economic domination.

A sobering new study looks at education and income and found that there is little intergenerational mobility in India. Muslims are the biggest losers in the intergenerational mobility index whereas Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have done better. The study also pointed out that the intergenerational mobility is on the decline among Muslims and their condition is worse than that of the African-Americans. The education system alone cannot bring about change in society. We need the political will to invest in education and design policies that take into account the socio-cultural and economic complexities of our society. The vision must derive from the idea of India that the founding fathers of the Republic wrote into our Constitution.

In the above description, the socio-cultural and economic heterogeneity that exists within the community is ignored and all residents are painted in the same colours. The area remains resource-scarce and unhygienic due to neglect by governmental agencies. Both

---

adults and children are acutely aware of the injustice and discrimination meted out to them by the majority community and what they consider as organised conspiracy by today’s governmental agencies. As we have seen, prejudice, stereotyping, labelling, criminalisation and subsequent alienation compel and coerce Muslims to take refuge in such spaces. This further hinders their educational mobility and progress. The process of communalisation has been historically used for othering Muslims as scapegoats in the face of lost power and status and non-existent prosperity. The threat to equality continues to drive dominance, bigotry and intolerance towards them.

The term ‘ghetto’ was historically used for Jewish areas in the Nazi regime where Jews were restricted, isolated and resource-deprived. As we have seen, the area around the school is home to people from different walks of life who may regard ‘ghetto’ as a pejorative tag which is often used interchangeably with other labels such as Chhota Pakistan, Aatankwadiyon ka ilaqa, Musalmanon ka ilaqa and so on. The systematic exclusion of Muslims through steps such as the National Registers for Citizens, enforcement of draconian laws such as POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act 2002), UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Bill, 2019) and the violence in the form of a spate of mob-lynchings has further prompted Muslims to take refuge in areas such as above. Are not these areas fast emerging as the new ‘ghettos’? Though historically displaced, the term signifies the neglect, isolation, and structural social-cultural violence in the lives of Muslims in today’s India. The state machinery, in particular, has harboured such attitudes since 1947. Tragically, since the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, these have only gained greater currency, and with the growth of religious majoritarianism and its deep penetration of state power, have become a part of the ‘national common sense’.

Acknowledgments
I am grateful to Professor Anil Sethi for unending discussions and reading two drafts of the paper. He has an eagle-eye for nuances and this helped me refine the writing. I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer for detailed feedback. This helped me rethink issues and give a coherent shape to the paper. Thanks are due to Nandini Manjreker for inviting me to write for the MWS series. Her insightful comments proved to be most useful.
Glossary

- **Namaaz** is Islamic prayer. Muslims offer namaaz five times a day:
  - Fajir – the dawn prayer
  - Zohar – the noon prayer
  - Asir – the afternoon prayer
  - Maghrib – the sunset prayer
  - Isha’a – the night prayer
- **Taraweeh namaaz** is the longer-than-usual namaaz that is observed after Isha’a namaaz during Ramadan.
- **Barelvis** and **Deobandis** are two of several sects of Sunni Islam. They both follow the Quran and believe in the Prophet and his teachings. But there are some differences in their beliefs and rituals.
- **Tablighi Jamaat** is considered a non-political congregation of Sunni Muslims which has its presence in more than 150 countries of the world. It is a missionary movement that focuses on urging Muslims to return to primary Sunni Islam, particularly in matters of ritual, dress, and personal behavior.
- **Taleem** literally means education but here it is used for the lessons conducted by the Tablighi Jamaat. The main purpose of Taleem is to discuss the merits of different good deeds and demerits or punishment for bad deeds.
- **Zakat** is a form of alms-giving to the poor and needy, treated in Islam as religious obligation or tax.
- **Ijtema** is a gathering wherein an alim/religious scholar delivers a speech on a religious topic. There can be one or more speakers in an ijtema. The aim of organising this gathering is to remind fellow Muslims about the basics of their religion.
- **Triple talaq** is a form of divorce that was practised in India, whereby a Muslim man could legally divorce his wife by pronouncing talaq (the Arabic word for divorce) three times. The pronouncement could be oral or written, or, in recent times, delivered by electronic means.
- **Hafta** literally mean week. It is also used to refer to weekly bribes offered to policemen and the local mafia in return for some favour or allowance.
Bibliography


Chishti, Seema, “Upward Mobility: Muslims Down; SCs, STs Up; Upper-caste & OBCs Unchanged.” *The Indian Express*, 21 September 2018.


