

The School Of Life By Amina Khatun

At the root of the growing poverty in Priya Manna Basti is the absence of quality education. Only 10% of the residents have finished secondary education, and only 5% are graduates. Around 50% of children of school-going age are out of school. Amina Khatun points out the reasons for these shocking statistics in the third part of her series on urban poverty.

When you look at the city from here, among the populace you see no one with any dignity or pride. No one is aware... From *The City From Here* by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, translated by Agha Shahid Ali.

At the root of the continuing and growing poverty in Priya Manna Basti is education. Or the absence of any meaningful education. Being out of school is a vital indicator of chronic poverty. About 10% of the population of Priya Manna Basti falls in this poorest category. Around 40,000 people live in Priya Manna Basti. There are two Urdu-medium primary schools and a government-aided higher secondary school in the basti. There are also two non-government junior high schools and one non-formal school.

At the government Urdu-medium primary schools there are at least 50-70 students in each class. The school opens at 6.45 am but the teachers only arrive at 7.30 am. When they do arrive, they sit around and chat in the staff room. Until the teachers enter the class, the children are a riotous, noisy bunch. It takes at least an hour to quieten them, take the daily attendance and check their notebooks. Thus the first lesson is often missed. So is the last. That's because the children are supposed to get a midday meal comprising rice and vegetables, and sometimes an egg or some khir. As the school is also a day-time high school, children from the primary section are fed early, ie during the last class.

Are the remaining three periods enough to teach them the entire syllabus properly? Strangely, the students manage to pass their exams with good marks. And yet a Class 4 student cannot write a single sentence correctly.

Parents make no effort to find out whether schoolwork is corrected, whether the syllabus has been completed. It doesn't make a difference to them. But yes, they are upset if they think their children have received less food, or maybe did not receive an egg that day. In such cases, they visit the school and complain to the teachers. For the parents of a poor family with several children, the purpose of sending the child to school is simply to avail of the free midday meal. With so many children, there's no place for everyone in the tiny room they call home. Under such circumstances, parents prefer sending their children to school rather than have them wander the lanes and bylanes of the basti.

If the primary education of these children is so inadequate, how can they pursue higher education? Most children who get 70-80% in the Class 4 exam are unable to get admission into Class 5; only a few names appear on the admissions list. Although hundreds of thousands of Urdu-speaking people live in Howrah, there are only three Urdu-medium schools for boys and four for girls in the area. Can the needs of the Urdu-speaking community be met with so few schools?

Howrah Higher Secondary School, which is in Priya Manna Basti, has 175 seats in Class 5. At least 1,300 admission forms are distributed among the hopefuls, for a fee of Rs 30 each. But just over 100 children's names appear on the list. The remaining seats are reserved for children of the teachers' relatives or people associated with the ruling party.

So, where do all the remaining children go? Some rejoin Class 4 and others join private schools. But several are unable to pay the admission fee in private schools. They are forced to begin working, starting a different chapter in their lives. It's as though they have moved directly from childhood to adulthood. They begin working when they are 10-12 years old.

The education of the few children who are admitted to Class 5 begins anew. Teachers who teach at the school give tuitions after school hours where they explain what they have taught at school properly, and see that the child does her homework. In return, they charge a hefty fee. Parents are compelled to send their children for tuitions because if they do not their children would fail, and no one wants that.

Only about a quarter of the children who are admitted to Class 5 stay on at school to take the secondary school examination. About 50-60% of them pass. Some of those who pass join the higher secondary class, while others take up a vocational course. About 30-40% of those who take the higher secondary examination clear it. Only a few then join college for undergraduate studies.

When the children get to college after having spent 12 years of their life in an Urdu-medium school, they become aware just how handicapped and helpless they are. In college, lecturers take classes in English or Bengali. All the books are in English. And they barely know those languages. Somehow a few students manage to graduate, but they are really very far from receiving a good education. Yes, the children are exposed to computers at government schools but I conducted a survey at an Urdu-medium government school and found that the school had computers and the teachers had received training in computer applications. They teachers had trained for exactly seven days, based on which they were expected to teach the children!

Little wonder then that the teachers who teach at government Urdu-medium schools send their own children to English- or Bengali-medium schools. An inside view Mohammad Jamaluddin is the headmaster of Howrah Upper Primary School. He became headmaster in November 2008; earlier he worked as assistant teacher at another Urdu-medium primary school, Bazme Shorfa Primary School, in nearby Chowrah Basti, in Shibpur. According to Jamaluddin the total number of students from Class 1 to Class 4 in his school is 493. There are two sections in each class, totalling eight classes in all. But there are only seven teachers. That means at least one class is permanently 'teacher-less'. The number of students in each class is as follows:

Class Number of students 106 /109 /130/ 148.

He explains that there is a government dictum on not holding back any student, all must be promoted to the next class. The students' acquisition of knowledge does not matter. And so when they go to senior school, to join Class 5, they encounter huge problems. Jamaluddin believes that in order to cover up their own failure in teaching students properly, teachers give students high marks in the exams.

The school sends a monthly report to the government; the actual number of students and teachers is regularly reported. Yet, the government takes no action. Instead, it asks the school authorities to form committees, hold regular meetings with mothers and with the ward committee. Jamaluddin says: "As it is we have a shortage of teachers. If we now have to organise these meetings and committees then when will we do our main work of teaching?"

But he remains hopeful. At the beginning of March, notices were posted at various public points about his school's requirement for five teachers. They have asked for eight more teachers. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: A view from the ground.

In July 2005 an ad in The Statesman invited proposals from NGOs under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for Howrah. A meeting was organised at the district magistrate's office, where a presentation was made by programme officials on how the application form was to be filled in. The form asked for details of the children's register that is supposed to be maintained at each municipal ward. On behalf of the Howrah Pilot Project, I was applying for support for the Talimi Haq School. We found that no register existed in our ward, so we did a fresh survey of children of school-going age who did not attend school. After considerable difficulty, the application was submitted by the due date in August 2005. There was no response -- for almost four years! Then we received a letter in February 2009 telling us to collect a form within three days, and submit it within a week. The letter mentioned --

incorrectly -- that an earlier effort had been made in 2007, and that it could not be completed due to unavoidable circumstances. When the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan coordinator was contacted, she shooed us away saying that the application date had passed. Urdu-medium education

In recent years, social scientists have undertaken a number of important studies on Urdu-medium education and slum-dwellers. A socio-economic survey in Priya Manna Basti by TARU, New Delhi, shows that about a third of children of school-going age, that is 6-14 years (both male and female), are either engaged in full-time employment or work to help their parents meet household expenses. This stems from a variety of factors -- pressure to earn arising out of a large family, death, retirement or illness of the primary breadwinner, etc. Raggicking, assisting in small enterprises like tea stalls, hotels, grocery shops, helping parents or family members do bead- or zari-work and embroidery are some of the tasks undertaken by boys. Girls work as domestic help, or assist their mothers in bead-work, toy-making, embroidery, zari-work, etc. Occupations like raggicking, though economically lucrative, involve loss of human dignity and identity. Many children face this at an early age.

Dr Sohel Firdos conducted a socio-economy survey of households in Priya Manna Basti, Howrah, in 2005. His survey covered only 100 households, but as it was undertaken in the basti itself, the findings merit a closer look. Though the literacy rate in Priya Manna Basti -- nearly 70% -- was appreciable, the actual educational attainments of the literate were poor. About one-third of them were only educated up to primary level; another 45% were educated up to the middle level. Those who were able to finish their secondary education constituted around one-tenth of the total literates. A mere 5% had completed graduation.

Studying the educational deprivation of children in Priya Manna Basti, Firdos found that about 15% of children in the 5-19 years age-group had never entered a school, and about one-third dropped out after starting. Thus, only about half the children in this age-group continued their schooling; the other half were out of the school system.

The percentage of girls who had never been to school, at about 13%, was lower than that of boys, at about 17%. Similarly, the percentage of girls who continued in school, about 57%, was higher than that for boys, at about 51%. Firdos says that this gender differential may be explained by the fact that boys bear the greater responsibility of working at an earlier age, and that educating girls is only seen as improving their marriage prospects.

Analysing data on children who had dropped out at various stages of schooling, Firdos found that the highest percentage of children staying away from school was at the middle level (Classes 5-8), followed by the primary level (Classes 1-4). The proportion of drop-outs at the middle level was double that at the primary level, at 53.85% and 27.88% respectively. It therefore emerges that most drop-outs occur either at the middle or primary levels. A little below one-fifth of drop-outs take place at the high school level. An investigation of drop-outs according to gender showed that the percentage of girls who dropped out at the primary stage was about half that of boys. But the percentage of girls who dropped out at the high school level was double that of boys.

Looking at age-specific enrolment ratios, Firdos found that although both boys and girls had a similar enrolment ratio of about 81% in the early age-group of 5-9 years, in the next age-group of 10-14, the enrolment ratio fell sharply to 67.11% for boys while it actually improved to 86.36% among girls. The enrolment ratio for both boys and girls took a huge plunge in the next age-group, 15-19 years. It was a mere 14.29% for boys while in the case of girls it was 19.70%. The age-group 10-14 thus appears to be a watershed in terms of continuation of education. It would appear that most school-going children are unable to continue their education beyond the age of 14. Firdos also looked at expenditure on education. An overwhelming majority of parents in the basti bore the cost of educating their children, incurring between Rs 11.67 per child per month and Rs 1,666 per child per month. Most parents were concentrated at the lower end of this expenditure spectrum. About half the parents spent less than Rs 100 per child every month, and one-third spent between Rs 101 and Rs 500. There were only a few who could afford to spend a substantial amount on their children's

education. Thus, even those in the low-income bracket had to spend out of their meagre income to support the education of their children.

In an article published in *The Statesman* in 2005 on the educational scenario among Kolkata's Urdu-speaking community, anthropologist Dr M K A Siddiqui wrote that the total number of boys and girls of school-going age in this population was estimated to be 140,000. The total enrolment figure for boys and girls in this linguistic group, in all 27 recognised schools that catered to their educational needs, did not exceed 14,663. The 27 recognised schools, with the exception of one or two, were extremely substandard and incredibly overcrowded. Only 11% of Urdu-speaking boys and girls went to school.

Siddiqui points out, on the basis of a survey in a basti in Kolkata conducted in 1997, that the percentage of illiteracy was higher than what it was on the eve of independence in 1947. According to him, this is an index of the downward mobility of the community in terms of literacy; it is even greater in overall education.

Siddiqui says that in spite of their socio-economic situation, there is a burning passion among the vast majority of Urdu-speaking people to get an education and educate their children. They see this as the only way to change their lot. But when they try to give their children the benefit of education they experience only frustration. Siddiqui makes the chilling assessment that the very survival of the community as a self-respecting segment of society is at stake because of this. Looking ahead.

In an article on primary education among Muslim slum-dwellers in Kolkata published in the *Economic & Political Weekly* in 2005, economist Dr Zakir Husain concluded that education was considered important for both boys and girls. But since Muslims perceived a bias against themselves in the labour market, boys become disinterested in further education. They seek work in the informal job market instead. Husain therefore advocates the replacement of formal education at the secondary level by vocational training courses. He believes that this would enable self-employment and also counteract economic disincentives to seeking education. Also, it could lead the low-income Muslim slum-dweller to allocate more towards his children's education.

Husain points out that a different process is at work as far as girls are concerned. He emphasises the role played by mothers in supervising the education of their children. Educated mothers are what is needed; an education also helps women in the event of desertion. Parents educate their girl-children with all these factors in mind.

Once she reaches adolescence, however, a girl's movements are restricted. Husain believes this can in fact prove positive for her education. As girls are restricted to their immediate neighbourhood and to the nearby school, this could serve to increase their focus and lead to higher educational aspirations. But he does identify the conflict between providing education and preparing girls for their future domestic role. This conflict manifests itself not at the primary level but at the secondary level, eventually leading to the withdrawal of the girl from school, either to get married or to prepare for her marital duties. Husain believes that a change in social attitudes is important. Increasing the age of marriage for Muslim girls, through legislation, is crucial. He highlights the challenge for social movements in this regard, which could also lead to Muslim women moving out of the household and into the external world.

Siddiqui concludes his assessment of the Urdu-medium educational system in Kolkata by saying that if the Urdu-speaking minority in this great metropolis is to be saved from total disaster, an educational action programme would have to be worked out by the community and society. Keeping hope alive Talimi Haq School is a non-formal learning centre in Priya Manna Basti. Established in 1998, it has taught over 700 poor children. The school is run by trained volunteers from within the community. It provides pre-primary and primary education, besides vocational training (stitching) to adolescent girls and literacy and numeracy to older working children. Children studying at Talimi Haq School are almost entirely first-generation school-goers.

Education is provided to the children through 'joyful means'. After years of apathy on the part of parents, the school has been successful in awakening them to efforts being made on behalf of their children. While teachers earlier had to go house-to-house to motivate parents to send their children to school, today it is the parents who are bringing their children to school.

Talimi Haq School attempts to function as an island of love, decency and learning in the existing degraded social environment. The school's objective is to educate children to become good citizens, good human beings, and good parents whose children can dream and hope to realise their dreams. Talimi Haq School too has a dream -- of becoming a full-fledged high school that can transform the lives of poor children by providing them a world class education befitting the 21st century, right here in Priya Manna Basti.

The sad part is that the people of Priya Manna Basti have tried to provide their children with a good education. The first school in the basti was set up in 1931 – as we shall see in Part 4 of this series -- and later initiatives were kept going by community efforts and contributions. The state has played only a peripheral role in bringing education to the citizens of Priya Manna Basti.