

## **The Struggle For Education: A Chronicle Of Neglect By Amina Khatun**

**This is the story of Priya Manna Basti's struggle since 1931 to keep education alive by setting up community schools and libraries funded by 1-anna donations from households. It is a chronicle of state neglect.**

There was a time when Priya Manna Basti was a poor community struggling to get ahead in life, encouraged by community leaders. There were no schools in the basti, but people sent their children to schools in Kolkata. Now, it seems as if the community has given up the struggle, accepting that their children will be little more than labourers and petty traders like themselves (see Part 3 of this series).

Imran Ali retired in the early-1990s as headmaster of the Howrah Upper Primary School. His father, Nabi Bux, was a humble worker from Priya Manna Basti. But Imran grew up in his maternal home, in Kolkata, and did his schooling in the city. He returned to live and work in Priya Manna Basti after his matriculation.

According to Imran Ali, the Muslim Free School was set up in 1931 at 5 and 6 Priya Manna Basti, 3rd Lane. The founder of this school was a certain Abdullah, or 'Abdul Manager'. The school consisted of three rooms with corrugated tin sheet walls and a tiled roof. A courtyard on the northwest side of the school had flowering plants in neatly laid out rows. There were electric lights, fans, furniture and water. The teachers' salaries were paid by Howrah Mills Co Ltd.

Head teacher Mohammad Bakshi and two assistant teachers taught around 50 students, under Haji Mohammad's supervision. There was Abdullah alias 'Abdul Manager', Ismail Sardar, Khuda Baksh alias 'Kaloot', and several others. After attending Muslim Free School, the students would go to Kolkata for higher studies, mainly to Presidency School.

The Muslim Free School closed down around 1940, with the advent of the Second World War. The students had scattered all over the city in the general panic brought on by the Japanese air strikes.

In 1951, 11 people from the basti held a meeting to discuss the possibility of re-starting the school. Its headmaster was Jalil Ahmed Rizvi. Maulvi Fida Hussain also taught at the school. They were paid Rs 40 per month each, out of a public collection. Efforts were made during 1951-53 to have the school recognised. But because the name of the school was Muslim Free School, it did not get the sought aid -- the authorities were opposed to the name.

Imran Ali recalls that a dispute arose between the group of one Abdul Ghaffar and the group of Mohammad Azizullah, alias Aziz Ghauwasi, with respect to the school's development. Finally, in June 1953, Abdul Ghaffar gave over all responsibility of the school to Aziz Ghauwasi who consulted Imran Ali on ways of making the school self-sustaining. Imran Ali suggested changing the school's name. He proposed that the school be named Howrah Upper Primary School and that qualified teachers be appointed in accordance with government regulations so that the school could be recognised and receive funding.

Thus, the Howrah Upper Primary School came into existence on July 1, 1953. The school's managing committee engaged Jalil Ahmed Rizwi and Maulvi Fida Husain to teach around 50 students from Classes 1 to 5. Their monthly salaries were reduced and fixed at Rs 40 and Rs 30 respectively, in the hope that they would soon receive benefits in the shape of dearness allowance (DA) etc from the government. In March 1954, Mohammad Shamsul Ola was appointed assistant teacher in place of Maulvi Fida Husain who had left the school the previous month.

Howrah Upper Primary School was recognised on March 1, 1954. Jalil Ahmed Rizwi, head teacher, and Mohammad Shamsul Ola, assistant teacher, were approved by the district inspector of schools, Howrah, under the government of West Bengal, with state aid of Rs 41 per teacher per month in the

form of DA and DG payable every six months by postal money order. In those days, the two teachers were teaching more than 100 pupils in Classes 1 to 5.

Imran Ali, who was attached to the school, would attend classes to teach students -- without remuneration -- whenever a teacher was absent or on leave so that the education of the students was not interrupted. On March 1, 1957, Imran Ali was approved as assistant teacher by the district inspector of schools, in place of Mohammad Shamsul Ola who had left the school.

There's another version of this story which says that the school was entirely supported by the mill. But apparently the person in charge of the school inflated the number of teachers on the rolls and thus took more money than he was allowed. A few people unearthed the scam and complained to the mill authorities. The mill appointed some of its officers to look into the matter. Indeed, they found that things were not in order. So funding was stopped and the school closed.

As it was the only school in the area, its closure caused a lot of hardship to local residents. Ghulam Rasool and his associates tried to revive the school on their own with a donation from Haji Abdul Rahim. The school committee was formed. A donation of 1 anna per month was collected from each basti household; school committee members donated 50 paise per month. Animal skins (from the Qurbani Eid) were also donated to the school.

#### **Other efforts:-**

In 1945-1946, Mohammad Yaqub Hussaini, a railway employee, started Adil Library, at 31 Priya Manna Basti Lane 2, from where a number of social initiatives, like literacy campaigns, were taken up. The property was acquired for Rs 60 before the First World War.

Janta Library too opened its doors, with night classes for children. Social functions used to be organised here. But the library soon closed down.

In 1963 a group of children started Kohinoor Library, subscribing as members and collecting old books. Later, in 1965, when Sir Syed Library came up, the two libraries merged. Another library, Awami Library, was opened in 1968; it was started by a breakaway faction of the pro-Congress Sir Syed Library. Awami was pro-CPI(M). During the United Front government of 1967, Jyoti Basu, as home minister, visited Priya Manna Basti for a meeting at the Awami Library. This library too closed down.

The demand for education in Priya Manna Basti is very strong. In 1978, the local Urdu-medium school, started and run by the people of the basti, received recognition as a junior high school. This was extended to high school status in 1986.