

Beyond Four Walls By Amina Khatun

I am Amina. I am 27 years old and a final year student of B.A. I hope to continue my studies.

I was born in a Muslim household. The neighbourhood I live in, Priya Manna Basti in the Shibpur area of Howrah, is predominantly Muslim. The people here are mainly jute factory workers, originally from Bihar and U.P., and speak Urdu and Hindi. My family is from Murshidabad, and my mother tongue is Bengali.

Most people here speak the language of the maulvis. But the maulvis of our society are uneducated and do not know anything about life and the world. They become maulvis by studying a few religious books. Their world is confined within four walls. They don't know about science or modern education. Can they guide others?

They say a girl's life must be lived within four walls. She should get married early so that her parents can then go for Haj. For the rest of her life she must not love but slave for her husband and on every marriage anniversary present a child. It makes no difference if she dies in the process. One dies, another will come. They say a mother is needed for the children, but they don't say they want another slave to run the household, who will give her blood for her husband and her home. This is our society - which tells people to love others and then tramples on women. What kind of society is this which does not care for another's pain or feelings?

In Islam it is said that after a person returns from Haj it's like he is re-born. But all around me, the atrocities of some of those who return from Haj only multiply. I see that in the Muslim community many people are involved in crime. It is the maulvis teaching in madrasas who are responsible for this. They say that as Muslims we should only receive religious education. No! That's why we have so many criminals amongst us, and too few engineers, doctors and professors. I am Muslim, so I must read the Koran, the Hadiths and other religious texts. But simultaneously modern education must be pursued.

I yearned to study right from my childhood. My father had studied in the Bengali medium, but my education has been in the Urdu medium. I started my schooling in a government school in PM Basti. This came to a halt after Class 8. Our school admitted girls only till Class 8, while boys studied till Class 10. I would have to go another school elsewhere. But how could my parents allow this, for after all they were Muslim. Faced with my stubborn attitude, they consented and I continued my schooling in a nearby neighbourhood. My father passed away just before my school final exam. I was thrown into darkness. But I was devoted to my studies. So I left my father's body at home and went away to write the exam. When I returned I had to hear all kinds of talk from people.

After that there was no one to help me. People at home did not permit me to continue my schooling in college. And how could they do that? Our economic circumstances were weak and besides no one in the family liked the idea of me, a girl, getting a college education. So preparations for my marriage began. But I did not stop. I went and admitted myself in the college. I had to be my own guardian. I began giving tuitions to pay for my college fees and books.

That was when I met my teacher, Mr Ramaswamy. From July 1998, I started working in his organisation, Howrah Pilot Project (HPP). I had nursed a desire in my heart to help other girls like me. But until then I did not know anything about the world and this was just a vague wish. After meeting him, my thoughts, my life - all changed.

My thinking and life were completely different from those of my society and family. Hence the attitude I faced at home and in the neighbourhood was quite bad. When I started working in HPP, all kinds of difficulties were encountered. We worked to educate poor women, girls and children. In our society women and girls are kept within the confines of four walls. How could they allow women and girls to work and walk shoulder-to-shoulder with men? Hence people at home, relatives and even the local political party activists tried to dissuade me. Today those very people come with their daughters and say "keep her with you"! I know now that if there's a true intention in one's heart as well as hard work, then the Almighty shows the way.

While working in the field of education, I met various kinds of people. I had the opportunity to be together with people of different beliefs and faiths. I began thinking about myself: who am I? what are my beliefs? what is my faith? From my childhood I had heard that there was one God of everyone, but in the name of that one God there were so many divisions. I was confused. Hindu society was divided into so many sects and castes. I was struck by the fact that Muslims had just one God, one sacred book in the Koran, and one prophet. Despite this pure unity, Muslim society too is broken up and divided into various sects. I remained in this confusion for several years. Finally I understood: just as if there's a flower there would surely be a fragrance, similarly if there was religion there must be good and truth in it. I know this about myself that I am a traveller on a right path. In this true journey I will one day surely meet my maker. This is my belief and my religion.

Good and true – are also things to be learnt. I too have learnt about this, from my home, my society and my elders but this was only completed after I met my teacher. What is good and true, how to love people, how to feel others' pain – I learnt all this. In this un-caring society, I had been living like an inert statue. Through working in HPP I was exposed to a new way of life, behaviour, feelings and respect for the poor, and efforts to awaken others' sense of good and right. I felt as if I was beginning my life anew.

As a Muslim woman my Islamic belief is that my religion shows the straight way to its believers. In every act of prayer, the one praying says "Oh Lord, show me the right path". I pray to my God to guide me along this path. My way may well be different from Islamic beliefs. I pray to God and so do others, but rarely does anyone emerging from the mosque after praying think about whether their way of life is straight or crooked. Islam or any other religion gives a way of living, but abiding by that depends upon the believers. Islam gives a way of living to me too. As far as my own experience goes, the way of Islam is also shown by other religions as well, and every religious precept is a message to uplift life. What is crucial is how we receive this message.

My life too could well have been like that of all the other girls who are born, grow up, get married, go away, produce children, stay at home, and die. I consider myself different from them today. I did not compromise my dignity. By staying within the limits of what is good, and living within the same society, I tried to change myself. In doing this I faced many difficulties and challenges. But I never admitted defeat before anyone.

My parents had raised me differently, in the way their parents must have raised them. But they also gave me the opportunity to complete my education. They did not have the circumstances to know what was really right or wrong. If I know better today, that is only through my work. I did not know what the world was. I only knew that where I lived was the world and this is where my life would eventually end. But now I know more, by having looked anew through my teacher's eyes.

How beautiful this world is, and how much joy there can be in life! I can feel the fragrance of life today. I live my life today according to my own wishes. The same person who was wary of leaving home now expresses herself before you!

Islam teaches one to utilise the gifts given so compassionately by God to serve God's creatures. I like this. My work gives me the opportunity to practice this, to discern and realise what I have received, and to serve others with these gifts. Hence my work is also an Islamic choice. Jan, 2006 (Translated from Urdu)

Glossary Hadith: the narrations of the life of Prophet Mohammed and the things approved by him. Haj: the pilgrimage to the Islamic sacred sites in Mecca, Medina, obligatory for all Muslims. Madrasa: Islamic seminary. Maulvi: Islamic cleric, teacher.

About the author

Amina Khatoon lives in Howrah, India and is a community organiser and teacher.