

Education as a Path to “Being Someone”

Muslim Women’s Narratives of Aspiration, Obstacles, and Achievement in an Impoverished *Basti* in Kolkata, India

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THE STATUS OF MUSLIM FEMALE LITERACY GLOBALLY AND IN INDIA

In a contemporary context of depressing numbers for especially Muslim female literacy rates overall in India today, I present the voices of young women and girls from an impoverished, Muslim-majority *basti* community in south-western Kolkata, India.¹ In narratives that speak of aspirations to education as a path to “being someone,” of economic, health, culture, and gender-related obstacles they encounter as well as in the educational achievements of three women from the *basti*—Nayla, Shahnaz, and Samiya—I explore what they mean by “being someone.” What are the educational goals the women envisage, what gets in their way, what factors contribute to their (relative) success? How do they compare with other Muslim girls in the *basti*? What kind of exemplars are they to those other girls?

My research is grounded in field research I conducted between 1997–2002 in a majority-Muslim slum (*basti*) in Kolkata (West Bengal state), observing a community-based organization’s initiatives to promote female literacy at all levels and recording the obstacles faced by girls in getting an education.² In the women’s narratives I document, I present the complex reality that underlies the path to an education for the *basti*’s women. Their educational achievements, and what it takes to get there, are, I suggest, more productively understood in comparison with and in relation to (a) those Muslim girls of the *basti* who were aspiring to simply literacy and a primary school-level education (nonformal education in home school); and (b) those girls in the Roshni tutorial program, from formal schools serving the *basti* area, who wished to matriculate (class 10), or go on to post-secondary education (classes 11 and 12, and then to three years in college for a bachelor’s degree). But to be effective exemplars—which Nayla, Shahnaz, and Samiya assert they are—it is the path

by which they achieved their goals, their perseverance in the face of considerable odds, that they served as role models for the two cohorts of Muslim girls described in the basti.

Globally the status of Muslim women is mixed and diverse. Conway and Bourque note that educational systems are microcosms of the gender systems of the societies in which they operate, and that access to both formal and nonformal education is linked to a greater sense of self-esteem and empowerment for women.³ In a later collection of essays the cultural bias against female education in India and Pakistan is noted, as is the need for fundamental changes in patriarchal structures of society (which have not caught up to legal changes). Yet in the case of Indonesia, a Muslim-majority nation, women share greater similarities with its southeastern neighbors and are active in the market and in public life—even as gender inequities exist.⁴ John Esposito observes that the general status of Muslim women across the world is varied and is impacted by a nation's economy, levels of literacy, and economic development as well as by religion.⁵ However, even as patriarchy and its legitimation by religion prosper in many Muslim nations, there are challenges. Citing the 2007 Gallup World Poll, Esposito observes that in many conservative Muslim nations a majority supports women's equal rights, citing 61% of Saudis, 85% of Iranians, and 90% of Bangladeshis, Indonesians, and Turks who do so. A woman's right to vote without interference by family is supported by 80% in Indonesia, 89% in Iran, 67% in Pakistan, and 56% in Saudi Arabia. But, Esposito notes, contradictions abound. For example, even though Saudi women own 70% of savings in banks, and 61% of private firms, they do not vote, are segregated, are restricted to "appropriate" professions, and are not allowed to drive.⁶ In Morocco 20% of judges are women, yet post-secondary education in this nation falls to 8%. Iranian women, while compelled to veil, attend university in larger numbers than men, at 52%.⁷ Nussbaum, referring to the Education and Women's Capabilities section of the 2001 United Nations Human Development Report, observes that in one quarter of the world (43 nations of 162), overall male rates of literacy are 15% higher than female rates—including India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In absolute terms, female literacy is at or below 50% in these nations but lowest in Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh.⁸

On women's literacy in general, in India the Public Report on Basic Education in India (PROBE, 1999) noted that while the nation had successful higher education initiatives, this obscured the 2001 census finding that one third of children aged 6–14 (23 million boys, 36 million girls) were out of school, and that 61% of females and 36% of males over 7 years of age were illiterate.⁹ A 2006 news report comments on the "dismal" state of affairs in the country

even into the twenty-first century. While South Asian nations as a whole have a low primary completion rate (PCR) at 70% for adolescent girls in classes 5–6, India rates at 66%. Some 50% of girls drop out at puberty, and the literacy gap between boys and girls continues to be high, especially in north-central Indian states like Uttar Pradesh. Reasons offered include domestic work required of girls at home, restricted mobility, gender bias in textbooks, and biased or indifferent teachers.¹⁰ The 2011 Indian census lists an overall 65.46% female literacy (compared to 82.14% for men and 74.04% for the nation), and a rise in literacy rates overall between 1961 and 2001 from 40.4% to 75.2% for males and from 15.4% to 53.7% for females. A general literacy rate for those over seven years old offers more optimistic rates, currently at 88.76% for urban males and 79.11% for urban females.

While improving its numbers over the years, however, India does not come out ahead for its current population of around 140 million Muslims. In the 2011 census Muslim women's literacy (post-primary education) is listed at 50.1% and men's at 67.6%. Earlier scholarship on Muslim women in India notes the need to place their especially disadvantaged position in the context of a minority community's history in independent (Hindu-majority) India, and the nation's retention of the Sharia, or Muslim Personal Law, where especially women lose out on potentially progressive legislation under Indian civil law.¹¹ This scholarship notes the community's backwardness in educating its women and the inverse relationship between low literacy levels, high fertility rates, and women's low status. Where minority status is combined with cultural constraints as well as poverty, the road to women's advancement is an especially steep climb for impoverished Muslim women.¹²

In 2005 the prime minister's office noted the lack of authentic information on the social, economic, and educational status of Indian Muslims and the need to identify areas for government intervention. It commissioned a study (led by Justice Rajindar Sachar) and, based on visits to thirteen states with the highest Muslim populations, the Sachar Report (in its fourth chapter on education) found that rates of literacy for Muslims were considerably below the national average.¹³ Compared to other underprivileged Indian social groups who have benefited from affirmative action (like scheduled tribes and castes), Muslims, especially in urban contexts, have not fared well and Muslim women particularly so. Despite the Indian Constitution's mandate that all children between the ages of six and fourteen have a compulsory primary level education, 25% of Muslim children between these ages have never attended school or have dropped out. In premier colleges, at the undergraduate level, there is 1 Muslim for 15 students and 1 in 50 at the postgraduate level. The unemployment rate for young Muslims is the highest among socio-religious commu-

nities. Among reasons for its findings the report cites urban poverty, lack of access roads and infrastructure in rural areas, the low availability of Urdu-medium public schools at the elementary level, the absence of schools in proximity to homes (impacting especially girls), and the lack of female teachers. It recommends that where Muslims fall behind in most dimensions of development, there is a need to put in place mechanisms to ensure equality of opportunity. It proposes more inclusive textbooks, reasonable tuition costs for minority students, effective and inclusive teacher training, more state-funded Urdu-medium public schools, and linking of privately run *madrasas* (Islamic religious schools) to state school board requirements.

A 2013 response to the 2005 Sachar Report notes that six years later, the government's record on addressing the poor status of Indian Muslims has been, to date, inadequate. The rate of educational growth for Muslims in 2009–10 continued to be the lowest at all levels, in comparison with other backward castes, in both rural and urban areas, and even lower than for scheduled castes and tribes. This article also notes that the Ministry of Minority Affairs had underutilized the money allocated to it by the central government, using a mere 22.8% of nearly 3.7 billion rupees for minority concentration districts.¹⁴

More recent studies support the findings of the Sachar Report, affirming that the literacy rate for Muslims is below the national average and that there is a distinct link between poverty and illiteracy.¹⁵ However they critique the monolithic image of “Muslim women” and note that Muslim Indian women are differentiated by class, caste, community, and geographic location, as also by the rural-urban divide. For example, Muslim women's rates of literacy are lowest in the northwest state of Haryana and highest in the southwest state of Kerala. The authors attribute this to the persistence of nonprofit organizations.¹⁶

However, even so, compared to other faiths the majority of Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, least literate, most impoverished, and most politically marginalized in the nation.¹⁷ In their study of Muslim literacy in the state of West Bengal (of which Kolkata is the capital and which, at 25%, has one of the highest Muslim populations in India, after the state of Uttar Pradesh), Hussain and Chatterjee observe that the primary completion rate for Muslims in this state, across both genders, is lower than even Hindu underprivileged groups, at 70%. But even as young Muslim girls have higher PCR rates than boys, in both urban and rural contexts, it is pertinent to note that these PCR rates imply the *falling* numbers of especially girls *beyond* the middle school level. However, these authors do not comment on this other than to say that the Indian Muslim population is generally poorer than Hindus and does not have progressive views on education.

In sum, the scholarship and reports I have summarized present a bleak pic-

ture. Numbers, however, do not speak to the aspirations of the women, their perseverance, and the obstacles they confront and sometimes transcend, or the factors that allow them to do so. We need to hear their voices. The women I speak of in this article offer their personal stories of struggle and hope, of “being someone,” that an education makes possible. My conversations with the Muslim women and girls in the basti, at different educational levels and in different contexts, substantiated the problems with poverty, the pressure to marry off a daughter at puberty, when *purdah* and restrictions on her mobility especially come into play; the constraint on a girl’s parents at marriage to pay for a dowry (an originally Hindu custom), at the expense of school for a daughter; of gendered chores the girls must perform at home; of gender bias that encourages a boy but not his sister to go to school; and of health problems in the crowded, unsanitary conditions of a basti that keep a girl from school. Yet, some aspire and dream and achieve.

In the sections that follow I discuss the initiatives by a community-based organization for educating especially adolescent girls in the basti, and present, in brief, the voices of two cohorts of younger Muslim girls—in home schools, and in the Roshni tutorial program. I then present the more detailed narratives of Nayla, Shahnaz, and Samiya, grouped around themes of family circumstances, their aspirations to education, the obstacles they confront, and their roles as mentors in the basti community. I conclude with reflections on an apparently intangible factor, “motivation” or “desire” (*shauk*, in Urdu, and *icchha* or *icchhe* in Bengali), that drives some (but not all) women to pursue an education, to “be someone,” the factors that facilitate their perseverance and achievements, and whether we may understand the self-defined goal of self-respect and community respect for the educated woman as achieving some level of autonomy.

THE GIRLS OF THE HOME SCHOOLS

The Sir Syed Group of Schools (SSGs), a home-grown organization, had been working in this basti in southwest Kolkata since 1969, originating as a night school run by young men, with the aim of community development.¹⁸ The basti population when I was conducting research stood at around 85% Muslims, 12% Hindus, and around 3% Christians, according to the Family Helper Project (FHP). The FHP, whose projects I was observing, and for which Shahnaz, Samiya, and Nayla worked, operated under the aegis of the SSGs and had been set up and funded in 1986 by the Christian Children’s Fund (CCF), a private Christian charity based in the United States, to provide literacy and health information to about sixty children (sponsored by private Americans

through CCF). The FHP, with a staff of around seventy people, operated in three municipal wards with a population of around 150,000 people but actually worked with around 600 families. About 450 children (who included the siblings of the sponsored child) also received help with school and medical costs from the spillover of the sponsorship money. Of these children 55% were girls, the majority Muslim, some few Hindu. The spillover was also allocated to other projects run by the FHP, such as a Preventive Health Care Center for mothers and children, a Community Clinic providing immunizations, “awareness” programs (for example, on “Safe Motherhood,” or on the values of a sanitary environment), and vocational training programs. The FHP also ran nine early childhood care and development centers for children between three and five, an adult literacy program, and a day care center. However, the FHP’s particular focus was geared toward motivating and educating the adolescent girls—in whom the future of the community was seen to be vested, and who were particularly vulnerable to being denied schooling. The overall drop-out rate for basti girls by middle school stood at around 60%, according to the FHP, and subsequent “early marriage” at 15 or 16 (illegally, and often with dowry, also an illegal custom) was a particular problem.

One segment of girls targeted by the FHP were those from especially impoverished and conservative Muslim families, Urdu-speaking, mostly rural immigrants from the north-central state of Uttar Pradesh, who were provided with a two-year, nonformal primary-level education (classes 1–6) at home schools. These were literally run at home by a young woman with a class 10 education, who lived in the immediate neighborhood, was known to the girls’ families, and was seen as an “older sister.” The FHP offered her a three-day training by state syllabus guidelines and paid her a salary of 175 rupees a month (less than \$3 today) for a five-day week of teaching three hours a day. The goal was functional literacy, so that girls could fill out money orders or read a newspaper. They were also educated about STDs and about children’s diseases (diarrhea and respiratory illness, common in the basti). The FHP cited the drop-out rate from home schools at around 40%.

Thirteen home schools were operational at the time I was observing the initiatives of the FHP. I attended one such twice, run by Nayla, and spoke with eight girls, ranging in age from twelve to twenty-three, who spoke to me in Urdu. My visit was more productive the second time, but only relatively so, as the girls were very shy in the presence of a visitor from America. Shahnaz was with me, and with Nayla, we sat on the bed in the room in Nayla’s home where class was to be held. The girls sat on the floor.

Every girl had a large family of five to seven siblings.¹⁹ Their brothers were either illiterate or had dropped out by class 5 to work at the nearby market

or car shops (illegally by Indian law).²⁰ Their parents were either illiterate or knew enough Urdu to read the Quran. I asked the girls if they enjoyed school. Most nodded enthusiastically in the affirmative. One said that her family was already looking for a groom, and several noted that they were expected to help at home. The oldest woman, twenty-three and unmarried, said she had to see to younger siblings and had not gone to school for that reason—and that younger siblings had a better chance of going further in school. Two declared they would like to continue to the Condensed Course. According to the FHP, some 30% of home school girls went on to attend the Condensed Course, a two-year, nonformal program that offered an education up to class 10 (matriculation). The pass rate from this program was negligible, and those few who passed took the state board examination as private candidates. Again, “very few,” if any, would go on to higher secondary level, here classes 11 and 12, according to the FHP.

THE ROSHNI TUTORIAL PROGRAM

The Roshni (“ray of light”) program was started in 1995, sponsored by a Hindu businessman. It offered special tutorial assistance by a qualified teacher to Muslim girls who had been selected by the FHP as the top students in class 8 in area schools.²¹ This assistance was to prepare the girls for the class 10 board examinations and provide subsequent assistance with fees for college, if they were allowed to go by their families. The seven girls I spoke with at Roshni (between fifteen and eighteen years old) expressed a high level of self-motivation (*shauk*) to study further, even as poverty, levels of family support, and the pressure to do gendered chores at home ran through their narratives, which I summarize later.

Three of the girls had not yet taken their class 10 board examinations. Salima, in class 8, was one of eight siblings and really desired an education (*parne ka bahut shauk hai*). But she had failed class 9 because of her health. She declared she was the only girl in her generation (and in her family) to have this level of education and wanted to go on to college, but she did not have her family’s support to do so. However, she was determined, and she was bitter that her mother (who had been educated till middle school) encouraged her brother, who was not interested in going to school, but wanted her to drop out and marry. When I asked her what the value of an education was for her, Salima said, “I will not consider myself lesser than anyone. Of all things valuable, an education is most valuable . . . I can be a teacher.” She wanted to study Urdu and to write short stories. In contrast, Mussarat, one of three siblings and also in class 8, had a most supportive family: “My parents want me to be

educated so I can stand on my own two feet . . . my father wants just this.” Her illiterate mother also encouraged her and did not pressure her to marry or do housework. Her poor eyesight was an obstacle. Shama, one of six siblings (and with a sponsorship through CCF), said that if her family did not support her she could not attend Roshni. She did not want to work as a domestic and wanted to be a teacher. Her eyes, like Mussarat’s, “hurt,” and it was a problem that the entire family lived in one room. Her mobility was somewhat restricted by her family, as people said bad things about a young girl out in public (thus going to the library could be a problem).

Afsari, in class 11, had a very poor family, and two brothers had dropped out of school to go to work. But her mother, though illiterate, wanted her to “be someone,” possibly an accountant, and her father too was supportive. She was not pressured to marry; even her brothers were “happy for her.” But she needed Roshni’s assistance (her father, she said, could not have paid for her after class 10). However Afsari, who also loved to draw, and to dance, suffered from gastric problems, and her other ambitions, such as joining the National Cadet Corps (like the U.S. Army Reserve) were not encouraged by her family because of her poor health.

Sabiha, in class 11 and one of six children, had benefited from her CCF sponsor. She too declared her *shauk* to get an education. She was studying the sciences, and after class 12 wanted to study engineering. However, her impoverished parents would find it difficult to support her as well as her siblings. She was proud, however, of her level of education, the highest among her siblings except for a brother who had completed class 12. She did have to help with household chores, like cooking and fetching water, and would study at night. When I asked if this hampered her, she replied, “We get tired if there is too much housework. . . . We sleep for a little while, and then begin our studies—at 12 a.m., till 2.30 or 3:00 in the morning.”

Shereen, with two younger brothers in school, had been with Roshni since class 8, with support from her parents, who wanted her to “be someone,” in this case a doctor. She had First Division grades in her class 10 board exams, and after class 12 intended to go to a good science program in college. She was not pressured to marry or to help with household chores. Finally, Sindhu, a single child, lived with her extended family, which included thirteen cousins. She had done very well in her class 10 exams (passing with distinction in science and life science) and wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. Her parents, both teachers, were her mentors. She did no domestic chores because her mother wanted her to focus on her studies, “so,” she told me, “I eat, study, and sleep!”²²

I have abbreviated, paraphrased and edited the narratives that follow to facilitate their presentation within certain themes that were highlighted in the women's reply to my question, in an open-ended conversation (rather than an interview): "What problems did you face in your life getting an education?" I discuss the implications of their reply in my conclusion.

Family Circumstances

Nayla, home school teacher, was eighteen when I met her in 1999 and, like Shahnaz and Samiya, spoke with me in Bengali (though, like the others, she had a fluent command of Urdu). A self-possessed young woman, she was the fifth of six siblings. Two of her older sisters, and one older brother, were married and lived elsewhere in Kolkata. The eldest brother, Barda, ran a small business in the Middle East.²³ At the time, Nayla's household (of two rooms) consisted of a mentally handicapped younger brother, her mother, and her paternal grandmother. An older brother, Mejda, lived with his wife in a nearby room in the basti and worked in the local bazaar. Barda had a bachelor's degree in commerce, while Mejda had passed his class 12 exams. Bardi, the eldest sister, had a class 8 education, and Mejdji, the second sister, had passed her class 12 board examination. Nayla herself had just completed her BA finals in history, political science, and education at a college affiliated with Kolkata University.²⁴ She had considerable domestic responsibilities, she said to me, especially after her Bardi had married and left home. These left her with little time to go have fun with her college girlfriends.

Shahnaz, as a senior social worker with the FHP, was one of the people responsible for recruiting the girls for Roshni and with special responsibility for programs involving adolescent girls and women. I first met her (then twenty-nine) in December 1997 and was struck by her intelligence and quiet confidence. I would come to learn of her insights into and detailed knowledge of life in the basti. Mentor to both Nayla and Samiya, she was a person most efficiently in charge. She had a master's degree in Islamic Studies from Kolkata University.

The fifth of six siblings, Shahnaz had three older brothers and an older sister, all married, and a younger, unmarried sister of twenty-four, who had completed her class 10 board examination. At the time her household consisted of her parents, the third brother (Chorda), his wife and three children, Shahnaz, and her younger sister, who all lived in a three-room home in the basti.

Samiya, twenty-four (in 1999) had a bachelor's degree and had been with

the FHP since 1996 and worked in its Sponsor Relations department, where she would write the correspondence between children and their American sponsor. She was the youngest of four siblings, with two older sisters, 32 and 28, and a brother, 26, all of whom were married. Samiya herself was engaged at the time to be married to a man (of her choosing) then in Bahrain, who was expected back soon in India. Her eldest sister (Bardi) dropped out of school by class 8, when she was married off. Samiya's second oldest sister, Mejdi, studied till class 4—and then had married, by choice, a young man who worked for her father.

A Father's Abandonment and Its Consequences

All three women mentioned as a defining factor in their lives and hopes the retirement or abandonment (or death) of a father, and the consequences of this event for their educational aspirations, and pressures to marry, but also to contribute financially to their families as well as to provide other services.

Nayla described the event central to her life's circumstances as the recent abandonment of their family, without explanation, by her father, possibly, she said, because he was ashamed of having no work. However, both her older brothers presently contributed to the expenses of the family. She wanted to get her teaching certification, but her Mejda wanted to marry her off. She commented that if a "good" groom was found, her family would pressure her to marry (her older sisters had been similarly pressured into marriage). She would also have liked to have studied law. However, her family did not want her in courts or traveling about with individual lawyers. There had been arguments at home about this, with Barda and her grandmother. The latter, Nayla reassured me, loved her, but scolded her for being argumentative, or refusing to go along with the many marriage proposals that came for her, noting that in *her* day she had had no choice. However, those days are gone, Nayla declared; she would not be displayed for approval to everyone and anyone at all who brought a proposal of marriage to her family. Her mother, she added, supported her in her stand.

Nayla's family had recently refused a proposal of marriage for her in which a demand for dowry of around \$1,200 had been made. The family was unable to afford it. Would she agree to dowry for herself, I asked? Nayla noted that her sisters had been given in marriage without dowry, and none had been demanded for her brothers. But her mother was now more amenable to give dowry, since "everyone today wants dowry." But, said Nayla, if dowry demands were made for her, *she* would oppose it. She thought it objectionable that her husband-to-be would take from her family to benefit his own. Since

she did so much for her family, Nayla noted, they would listen to her, because “her word was worth something.”

Nayla told me that she had no objection to marriage but that she would like to be self-sufficient, “to stand on her own feet.” This is why, she said, she wanted to do her B.Ed. (teacher certification) and then get a master’s degree, if possible. Being a teacher in a school was the kind of job (*chakri*) that she wanted.²⁵ Teaching is also the kind of work that her community held in esteem, so she would be respected by everyone. So whatever her husband might do, *she* would be known as a teacher.

In response to my questions, Nayla told me that her mother had supported her ambitions from the beginning, encouraging her, for example, to learn to use computers while she waited six months for the results from her class 12 examinations, telling her that she would “give her what she needed” to do this. She also learned typing for three months while waiting for her class 10 exam results. Her Barda had been especially keen that at least one of his three sisters be a graduate, so he was very happy with her achievements.

Shahnaz too wove her story around a theme of financial hardship. Her father, retired from his job as a draftsman with the Geological Survey of India when Shahnaz was seven years old, earned a pension of \$17 per month. The third brother (Chorda) worked in a small private firm, while his wife worked in a jeans-making factory, but both were there more in spirit for the family than in material terms, she commented. The major financial setbacks to the family were her oldest brother’s marriage, his move out of the household and then distancing himself from the family emotionally and financially. Her second brother, Mejda, had stopped giving the father income from land owned by the latter. Though Shahnaz’s father had the deeds to this land, he was in such poor health (bedridden in 1998) that no one was going to fight their brother over the matter. Shahnaz herself earned \$37 a month at FHP and gave it to her family. She supplemented this by offering tutoring to students and spent this \$10 monthly income on her personal necessities. Her younger sister took typing classes and paid for these by tutoring two children, earning \$3 per month.

I asked Shahnaz if her family could manage financially if she moved away after marriage. Shahnaz replied that it was less a matter of money than her close relationship with her ailing father. Their relationship was the most important to him of all her siblings, and one that bound her to him and to the family. The family would manage if she married, but her father would not have *her* with him. “How many times he inquires about me, how many times he reads his prayers so that his daughter may be fortunate, that she may not suffer in life,” she said. When he retired, and the family faced hard times, he was upset because she might not be able to continue with her studies. He was

also critical about his younger daughter, when she finished her class 10 exams and was “sitting around” the house.

Her father, Shahnaz said, would bring food home when they were young and would favor his girls. Their brothers would get angry, and her father would say that the girls would go away to other peoples’ homes when they married, and if they wanted to eat something no one would bring it for them at the in-laws—so he would give his daughters now what they wanted. If a neighbor’s daughter was to be married, or if she lost her father, Shahnaz’s father “searched the market” for fruits and sweets to feed the girl.

For all these reasons, said Shahnaz, she loved her father dearly. He was different; he had qualities she did not see in other fathers. Her Bardi was critical of their father and asked why he should feed other people’s daughters when he had two girls to marry off? Shahnaz emphasized her father’s dependence on her, that he called her his “staff,” and recounted that a marriage proposal had come for her some time before. Her father had grown faint, all but losing consciousness, and remained so through the night.

Their father, Shahnaz said, was never particularly interested in marrying off his daughters, advising them, rather, to study, “to stand on their own feet.” Her mother, educated till class 4 or 5 in Urdu schools, was neutral on the matter of education for the girls. However, she would not hinder her daughters or make them do the housework. She would see to all the meals, hence her poor health, from overwork. In spite of this, said Shahnaz, her other siblings were never really motivated to get an education.

Despite her father’s support, both financial constraints and family illnesses were obstacles to Shahnaz’s own educational hopes. Her father financed her special tutoring needs in math up to class 10. She did very well in her exams at this level, passing in the First Division (in 1985). She then entered the next two years for pre-college in science. Shahnaz asked her Bardi to help at this time with costs (around \$8) for tutorial help in math, physics, chemistry, and English. But since he was helping out her third brother, and she had to remind him every month for this money, she stopped asking him, paying for herself by tutoring. This left her very tired and unable to concentrate on her studies, and so she passed her class 12 exams in the Second Division. After this she paid herself for all of her further studies. She had wanted to be a doctor, and if she could have studied more for her class 12 exams she could have got admittance into a medical school. But the family had such financial problems that her father could not afford her education at the time. For this reason she decided to go with the arts, since this allowed her more time to earn money by tutoring students and also to work for pay. Her father had wanted her to get certified as a teacher, but she could not take the year off to do this. Shahnaz

got an MA in Islamic history from a college affiliated with Kolkata University, though this was delayed because her young niece died of a brain tumor. Her income, Shahnaz observed, had helped with the economic troubles their family had suffered since her father's retirement.

Shahnaz commented on the prevalence of dowry in the Muslim community and that she had not seen even one educated boy who would dispense with dowry when he married. If a girl's family could not afford it, then they would be informed indirectly that the marriage negotiations would not proceed further, that the household had not met with the boy's family's approval, and that the girl's family did not measure up in "status." A proposal for marriage had come for Shahnaz from a college professor, just as she had finished class 12. This man wanted her father to spend \$2,200 on things for the wedding, with "no other demands," that is, no cash demand. Her father had said that he could have sold his property and married his daughter off to this man, but feared that more demands would be made after the marriage, and he would be unable to meet them.

What caught me by surprise was Shahnaz's revelation of her secret engagement to a co-worker at the FHB, Alam, a handsome young man with a master's degree in sociology. I was taken aback that an otherwise reserved young woman would suddenly reveal this to me and later reflected that she desperately needed to unburden herself to a sympathetic outsider (confirmed later by her own admission). She implored me at the same time not to reveal it to anyone at SSGS since then she and her fiancé would be moved apart or would lose their jobs, by organizational rules. However, she had informed her father of the young man's presence in her life and that they intended to marry. Her father appeared to have accepted Alam, saying that if the young man is a social worker, he must be a good man.

I asked Shahnaz whether if her brothers had helped out more, she could have married and not worried about keeping her engagement a secret at work. Shahnaz replied that their father could not afford to pay the dowry for his younger daughters and needed her to work. She felt strongly about this injustice to women. Whenever a good proposal had come for her marriage, and "everyone wants that [she] marry into good circumstances," the dowry demands were so high that had her father married her off, he would have had nothing left to marry off his youngest daughter. He had had an income at the time of her Bardi's wedding, and had spent a lot on this oldest daughter, even drawing on his savings. He had then used more of his savings to build their small home, leaving around \$375 as a balance. This was inadequate, today (Shahnaz told me, and I knew this for a fact) to marry off even one daughter into good circumstances, let alone two.

Samiya's father had worked in camera repair and sales, while her mother used to cook on contract for the German Consulate but was no longer able to work since she had diabetes. Samiya's desire (*icchhe*) was to be educated, to fulfill her father's dream for her. The major setback to her life, Samiya said, was the abandonment of the family by her father, who left for Nepal, from where he returned only sporadically. This was a period of great turmoil for the family. Her mother was broken in spirit; they had lost their home and had to move in with her maternal grandmother. Her brother, then in class 4, dropped out of school, and was now making a living driving a taxi. Another critical setback about this time was Samiya's niece, her oldest sister's daughter, falling ill with polio, a crisis the family had to address.

After initially dropping out of class 4 when her father abandoned the family, Samiya returned to school, and she told me proudly that she had received a scholarship every year, which helped to pay for her textbooks. She had studied at great personal cost and now had to work, because her father had left the family with nothing when he eventually died in 1986. Her brother asked her to drop out of school when she was in class 9 so that the family could marry her off. However, her mother intervened on the grounds that they could not afford a dowry and, supported by her Bardi, encouraged Samiya to continue her studies. She shifted homes many times, sometimes living with her Bardi and at other times living with her mother and grandmother. Samiya went on to college, graduating with a BA in 1996 in a pass program in economics, political science, and geography.²⁶ She wanted to do an honors program in geography at some point in the future.

Samiya specially emphasized her brother-in-law's support for her, particularly since her own brother offered little by way of financial or moral support for her and their ailing mother. Her niece and nephews also had to struggle "without tuition," to be educated, but all had the support of their father.²⁷ All three of them were known for their achievements, and she herself, she told me with pride, was specially respected for her education. Her regret was that she could not afford to learn English, which would have helped her advance further, since she handed over a third of her \$22 monthly salary to her mother.

The family's support had worked for her when she faced community criticism as she went about alone, to school and later to work. This was especially the case when her brother-in-law was out at sea (he worked in the merchant marine), and she had to do "outside work" without an authoritative male figure to advise or escort her (such as getting an ID card at the hospital for her handicapped niece).

I met Samiya again in the summer of 2000 and asked about the status of her engagement. She had not been able to pursue her academic goal of study-

ing geography as an honors subject. Her fiancé was still in Bahrein, and she did not know if the marriage would take place. The real problem lay with his family, who had raised objections to her working with the ssgs and preferred that she not work at all. Their specific objection, however, had to do with the fact that such a family as Samiya's, without a father, would not be able to meet their dowry demands. Her fiancé, she said, would not stand up to his family's demands for dowry.

As Role Models and Community Leaders

Nayla began to teach home school for FHP in 1998. Her account to me of how she felt about her work was especially revealing of her motivation and dedication to the young women of her community. She was, I saw for myself, a strict teacher, reprimanding a student for not handing in her assignment. Nayla would tell me that the girl was conserving her notebook because she could not afford to buy school supplies (texts were provided free of cost by FHP).

Nayla motivated her students by telling them that she too was a young girl, but that above all, she had the *icchha*, so she had studied, and they, her students, were being given the opportunity, so they needed to work hard. Nayla realized, realistically, that for the conservative and poor home school students, earning money in a *chakri* was not a feasible concept. So, she told them, an education would get them a good marriage, since men today wanted literate wives. She was often angry with them for slacking off, she said to me, and told them that in return for her own hard work on their behalf, they owed her their effort. The girls sometimes did not come to school on flimsy excuses, complaining that she was strict. In my presence she reprimanded one student for laziness, commenting loudly that the girl was "as fat as her brain." If a girl missed school, she would arrange meetings with the parents and demanded to know the reason. Sometimes it was because that day a prospective groom had come to "view" the girl. However, when Nayla felt that the girl did not want to marry but was being pressured to do so, she would speak to the mother and try to persuade her to allow her daughter to continue in school, that her life would be better with a little education. She had these meetings formally anyway with the girls' mothers every two months or so at her home (also her school). Some mothers would say, let our daughters go to school for a while, then we will marry them off. Or they would make excuses, such as domestic chores that needed doing, to keep the girls at home.

However, Nayla respected the duties her students performed at their homes and told me that at 4:00 p.m. every day, when the municipality provided water to the basti at public tube-wells, her students would put down their books,

run home to pick up water containers, and line up at the tube-well to fill their buckets. After they had delivered these to their homes they would return to Nayla's school and finish their class. Nayla noted that it was very difficult to make her students and their parents understand that there is not only respect *from* others for an education but also self-respect (*atmasamman*). However, while obviously "outside factors" intervened, some students did give importance to their studies, she concluded.

Nayla commented on the difference between her students' parents' attitude to educating girls and her own. "If we are alright in ourselves," she said, "then I can go far, even to college, there is no problem. It depends on how I think, it is upon me." She herself had a "different mentality," but even so, there were areas in the basti where she was afraid to go to, from the viewpoint of her own self-respect, something she felt especially sensitive about in view of the level of her education and her work in the community. She had already faced criticism when some of the girls' mothers criticized her for being indulged, saying that she could go about freely, study, and work only because she was more comfortably off than many. The assumption here (accurately so) was that a girl with a higher level of education is generally past puberty and required more dowry for her marriage. This was more affordable for Nayla's family. But even so, argued Nayla, effort (*chesta*) and motivation (*icchha*) were important. It was with her own effort that she had gathered so many girls for her school. She had a sense of achievement, personally, she said, but also in what she did for her community. She knew she was respected for her work.

Shahnaz commented that it is the custom that girls must be married, and that men's education was emphasized more than women's, especially in their basti, and if girls' education could be given the same importance then they could be more independent (*swadhin*) before they got married. Most of her girlfriends wanted to study, she told me, but were often unable to do so because of poverty. So some of these girls would have to study "on their own efforts" before they married.

Both directly and by recounting how she began working with SSGS, Shahnaz talked with some pride of her capabilities and accomplishments. She mentioned another non-governmental organization that had been impressed by her, and for which she worked for a year in a UNICEF training program for street children. She was aware that as a "local girl!" she was in special demand. A UNICEF worker, who had seen her at work in the training program earlier, told the secretary of SSGS about her abilities. She was offered some more training before she began her present job at SSGS/FHP, in 1995, in charge of the programs for adolescent girls. Her abilities were especially recognized by the secretary of the SSGS in the communal Hindu-Muslim riots in southwest Kolkata

in the summer of 1996, when she was sent, along with another female social worker, to the riot-affected areas to pacify Hindus whose houses had been destroyed by Muslims.

While unhappy about her low salary, her nearly ten-hour workday, and a heavy workload, Shahnaz commented, in reply to my question, that she found her work satisfying. She liked the fact that she could help people and that people listened to her. She told me that she was respected for her ability and her contribution to her community. This I saw for myself in the community “awareness programs” for which she was responsible, where I noticed the women sit up and take notice as Shahnaz took the microphone to speak on diverse topics such as women’s health or sanitary living conditions. She liked the fact that she was now in a position to advise especially other young women, and mentioned Samiya, who despite her hard life was now a college graduate. Shahnaz had talked to the secretary on Samiya’s behalf and found her a position with SSGS/FHP. She concluded that when she could encourage girls like Samiya, not only was she herself an example but also “when these girls can do something with their lives, when they can stand on their own, they are examples for other women like them.”

Samiya told me with pride that she had been promoted at FHP in less than three years, from preschool teacher to assistant social worker and then to the Sponsor Relations department. The SSGS had sent her to New Delhi, a thousand miles away, for Sponsor Relations training and to learn to use the computer for her work. She now knew how to type and had a diploma in computer skills.

Samiya observed emphatically that she had studied hard and would not give up her job, where she had recently been promoted to her present position, with a 50% salary raise. Nor would she be happy to give up working after she was married, since she saw her co-workers as her family and did not want to leave them. Besides, she asked me, what was wrong with working in a public place? She was supported in her views by her “older sister” and friend Shahnaz. And if, for all of these reasons, she could not get married, so be it, she declared. She *was* “standing on her own feet” and would not easily give up what she had fought for. She also asked rhetorically, what would happen if a man decided to take another wife? Where would she be then? Muslim law allows this, and divorce can be a simple matter in Muslim personal law, she observed.

Samiya, when I met her again in the summer of 2001, continued to live with her mother, in her older sister’s home. She expressed her sense of being overworked and underpaid at the FHP. As women, she commented, she and Shahnaz were not adequately outspoken to demand better pay. But they were

both also the protégés of the much older man who headed ssgs, a community leader, to whom they both felt obliged to be deferential and grateful for work. However, on certain issues, such as office space, Samiya told me, she had protested, and her demands had been met. She commented that she served as a role model for the basti children, who came to her to compose their letters to their American sponsors. They would say to her that they too wanted to work with computers, like her, when they grew up.

But in the End . . .

In the summer of 2000 Samiya informed me that Nayla's family had negotiated a marriage for her and that she had been formally engaged to a man who lived in Mumbai, on India's west coast. When I talked with Nayla again that summer, she was teaching both home school and the Condensed Course. Her fiancé worked for a pager and cell-phone company. The family did not want dowry, Nayla told me. Neither had yet seen the other.

Nayla expected the wedding to take place in around a year or more—the later the better, she admitted to me, because she was afraid of what the future held for her. She reflected upon the necessary “adjustments” in a new home and then admitted that her in-laws wanted women to veil, to wear the burka, which Nayla presently did not wear. Her girlfriends teased her about this and asked what she would do.

In the summer of 2002 I learned from Shahnaz and Samiya that Nayla had been married in December 2001 and moved to Mumbai, and that she did indeed have to wear the burka. She was no longer allowed to work outside the home.

Shahnaz and Alam were married on May 7, 2000, and were living in a rented apartment a half hour away from the basti. She went every day to see her father (he was to die in 2003). In the summer of 2001 Shahnaz called to inform me that she was pregnant. Severely anemic, she had taken time off work. In July she had a baby boy, and I did not get to see her that year. I met her again in the summer of 2002, in dire circumstances, when the FHP was shut down in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, when she (along with Samiya and Alam) lost their jobs.²⁸ In 2015 I was informed by Alam in an email that he was working in Nigeria for a nonprofit and that Shahnaz was teaching school in Kolkata.

In the summer of 2002 Samiya informed me briefly, and without further explanation, that her marriage plans had been “completely” abandoned. In 2003 I met her briefly and learned that she was selling insurance.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Both cohorts of girls, in home schools and in the Roshni tutorial program, are motivated to study. The former face greater challenges, by way of restrictions on their mobility, hence their presence in a neighbor's home to acquire basic literacy, in close proximity to their own homes. But especially poor and conservative families are factors that keep them from further aspirations, and they drop out, even from home schools, in high numbers. The Roshni girls, in formal schools, are at class 8 or further and evidently can and do aspire to more. Yet, even with them, family support is not a given, for reasons of culture or poverty (especially for large families), or both, and ill health. But they persevered, or told me they would.

What then is meant by “being someone”? As the narratives of the Roshni girls and then the older women imply, or say explicitly, this involves rising above the hardship of their lives, where education provides a path to work and income, to “stand on one's feet,” but especially to earn respect—both self-respect and the respect of their community. It is an identity that incorporates simultaneously a desire (*shauk*, *icchhe*) for education as well as its promises—autonomy, as defined, but one that is embedded in the particular circumstances of their lives—an identity molded by and earned by the hurdles they confront and, to some extent, transcend.

Such “autonomy,” carefully and culturally constrained, is complex and needs to be understood in the context of patriarchal traditions that restrict, in this case, an impoverished Muslim woman's physical mobility, that mandate her (low) level of schooling, demanding that she be modest in behavior and dress, that she uphold the family honor by her chastity, and that she be married, to a “good” man preferably of her family's choosing, and, if possible, often with dowry. However, it also involves (some) freedom of mobility, the women's ability to counter early marriage and dowry pressure, and their ability to have an income, however modest, from work as well as decisionmaking powers, both within the family and in the community. “Autonomy,” as “being someone” in this context involves an expansion of boundaries, a careful renegotiation of traditional patriarchal norms, but no radical confrontation—allowing Shahnaz, Samiya, and Nayla to be effective exemplars for the girls of the home schools and the Roshni program, in their own words.

It is pertinent to note, however, that there are other circumstances making it necessary for the three older women to push beyond their traditional boundaries. There is “no one above their heads,” as in a brother free or willing to pay the electricity bill at the office, for example, or to make a complaint at the phone company, or get an ID card from the hospital for a disabled child in

the family. They are then compelled to do such “outside work,” to appear in public, in lieu of absent men. However, both in their capacity of contributing financially to their households as well as in taking charge of some of the family’s operational details, these young women see themselves as stepping outside limits traditionally constraining other women. While criticized by some in their community for “moving about alone,” they also find that they are respected for their ability and their contributions to their families. It helps that a parent or an older brother or sister, by inclination but also because of necessity, supports the young woman against community criticism.

Yet boundaries may be pushed thus far and no further. I was told clearly by all three women that *pardah* (seclusion) was a matter of inner control and *inherent* modesty, rather than outer show, and that a woman *should* have this quality. This fact was strikingly illustrated to me not only in the quiet, graceful, and controlled demeanor of all these young women as they went about the narrow and crowded lanes of the basti, but also, especially, in how they wore the scarf or *dupatta* covering the chest.

Marriage at some point appears not to be negotiable. Even as they proceed through school, marriage proposals come their way, as do related demands for dowry, and the pressure on the girls by their families to marry is high, should the boy be a “good” one. Also constrained are their ambitions to work, where they are limited to “respectable” professions like teaching, while being a lawyer or future *chakri* in an “office” or in mixed-sex environments are problematic. Their “moving about alone” too is within the limits of how “work” is defined, such as going on errands for the household, or to work, or to school. The lively and able Nayla marries into a family that requires her to wear the burka and stops her from working outside the home.

Shahnaz’s marriage strikingly illustrates the perhaps conflicted, yet emergent and new identities being forged by the young women. On the one hand, the pressure a young woman of nearly thirty feels to be married in her community, and the lack of money that hinders a conventional alliance with its related demands for dowry, are issues resolved by her choice of Alam. On the other hand, her own sense of educational achievement and the respect this affords her inspires what appears to be an ultimately autonomous act in the circumstances—her marriage, by personal not familial choice, without dowry, to an equal, an educated social worker like herself.

The women’s ability to “stand on their own feet” must also be understood in relation to those with authority within a patriarchal system: a father who encourages his daughter to study, who allows her to leave the confines of the neighborhood despite community criticism, who upholds, above all, the value of his daughters; a mother who takes on the burden of domestic chores so

that her daughter can study or work; an older brother who helps by way of encouragement as well as financially; an older and married sister who offers her destitute and homeless younger sister her own home as the latter goes to school; a loving grandmother, or a sympathetic brother-in-law. Individual motivation and personal potential work in tandem with families aware of the value of an educated daughter, proud of community respect for her, and who are also unafraid of breaking, up to a point, with tradition. Supportive mothers, grandmothers, and sisters are important loci of cultural change possible within patriarchal institutions, as vested in women. However, it is in a senior male—a father, an older brother, a brother-in-law—where authority is traditionally and centrally vested. It is his support for a daughter, a sister, a sister-in-law that is effectual for her aspirations and potential to find fruition. It is his ability to stand against the customs of women’s restricted mobility and early marriage—to risk the honor of an older and unmarried girl (and thus of his family)—that provides a young woman with the support she needs, in her circumstances, to get an education, and concomitant respect. In other words, for impoverished young Muslim women to “stand on their own feet” and show their peers that change is possible, the traditional institutions of patriarchy must be negotiated, if not directly confronted or countered, by men as well as women, across generations, wherever power and authority, in their many forms, lie.

Education, says Nussbaum, is integral to women’s ability to form social relationships on a basis of equality, to achieve the “important social good” of self-respect. In providing access to mobility, to health, to information, to political process, to dignity—to “capabilities,” as a human right, education is a matter of social justice.²⁹ To conclude, in a microcosm of a few Muslim women’s voices, I have attempted to offer the realities behind the continuing statistics of low Muslim female literacy rates in India. There are those Muslim women who, in the face of considerable odds, evidently aspire to an education, who persevere toward their goals of “being someone,” and toward some degree of autonomy, inspiring those who follow. It requires political will in India to recognize those realities, to initiate and implement those measures that afford Muslim women their human rights in a secular democracy.

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NOTES

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1. *Basti* loosely translates to “slum” but less pejoratively means an “unplanned settlement.” This basti in southwest Kolkata arose in the hinterland of Kolkata’s port and is made up of many migrants from the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as well as from rural Bengal, who came to find work as dock laborers. With the decline of the port in the 1960s many basti dwellers were left without work. This densely crowded environment spreads over many square miles. A maze of brick and plaster rooms with shared walls are home to families who live in the basti, often with a single room for a family of ten. Toilets are shared among families, and open drains run through the area.

2. Jill Ker Conway and Susan C. Bourque, eds., *The Politics of Women’s Education: Perspectives from Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 3.

3. Grace L. Mak, ed., *Women, Education, and Development in Asia: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

4. John Esposito. “Why Don’t Women Have More Power in Muslim Countries?” August 27, 2010, <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2010/08/27/why-dont-women-have-more-rights-in-muslim-countries/223>.

5. Esposito, “Why Don’t Women,” 2.

6. Esposito, “Why Don’t Women,” 3.

7. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Women’s Education: A Global Challenge,” chapter 37 in *Global Perspectives on Gender and Work. Readings and Interpretations*, ed. Jacqueline Goodman (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 508–17.

8. *Public Report on Basic Education in India* (PROBE) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

9. Deepti Priya Mehrotra, “Girls Without Power,” *India Together*, March 8, 2006.

10. K. Jehangir, *Muslim Women in West Bengal: Socio-Economic and Political Status* (Kolkata: Minerva Associates, 1991); Vina Mazumdar, “Introduction,” in *Muslim Women: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Zakia A. Siddiqi and Anwar Jahan Zuberi (New Delhi: MD Publications, 1993), 1–6; Indu Menon, *Status of Women in India: A Case Study of Kerala* (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1981); A. R. Saiyed, “Muslim Women in India: An Overview,” in *Muslim Women in India*, ed. Mohini Anjum (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1992), 1–8.

11. A. Aziz and Firoz Khan, “Fertility as a Function of Education and Economic

Status among Muslim Women in Aligarh,” in, *Muslim Women*, ed. Zakia A. Siddiqi and Anwar Jahan Zuberi (New Delhi: MD Publications, 1993), 77–85; Zarina Bhatti, “Socio-Economic Status of Muslim Women,” in Siddiqi and Zuberi, *Muslim Women*, 11–18; John Cleland, Nashid Kamal and Andrew Sloggett, “Links between Fertility Regulation and the Schooling and Autonomy of Women in Bangladesh,” in *Girls’ Schooling, Women’s Autonomy, and Fertility Change in South Asia*, ed. Roger Jeffery and Amrita Basu (New Delhi: Sage, 1996), 205–17.

12. Aziz and Khan, “Fertility as a Function of Education”; Bhatti, “Socio-Economic Status of Muslim Women”; Cleland et al., “Links between Fertility”; Syed Zafar Mahmood, “Summarized Sachar Report on Status of Indian Muslims,” in *Milli Gazette*, December 13, 2013, 1–7.

13. Vidya Subrahmaniam, “Six Years after the Sachar Report, Muslim Lot No Better,” *Hindu*, January 14, 2013.

14. V. Shinde and Annie John, “Educational Status of Muslim Women in India,” *Review of Research* 1, no. 6 (2012): 1–8.

15. Shinde and John, “Educational Status,” 2. See also Nussbaum, who cites social and cultural factors for Kerala’s high female literacy rates, such as the greater value of females, matrilineal property transmission, but also political will on the part of the state to provide healthcare, education, land reform, flexible school hours allowing poorer children to work, and nutritious lunches; Nussbaum, *Women’s Education*, 514.

16. According to the 2011 census of India, literacy rates for other religions stand at 76.2% of Christian women (compared to 84.4% men); 61.7% of Buddhist women (83.1% of men); 63.1% of Sikh women (75.2% men); and 90.6% of Jain women (97.4% men).

17. Zakir Hussain and Amrita Chatterjee, “Primary Completion Rates across Socio-Religious Communities in West Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 15 (2009).

18. The organization was named for Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–98), a noted Muslim educator and reformer.

19. According to the FHP, basti families averaged 6.2 children per household.

20. According to the FHP, about 40% of boys dropped out by middle school.

21. Twenty municipality-run primary schools, and five secondary-level schools, teaching in Bengali, were available to the basti population. Only two such schools offered instruction in Hindi. Twenty schools at the primary level and one at the secondary level provided instruction in Urdu (the language of a majority of the basti population).

22. I was unable to follow through with the Roshni girls, in the wake of September 11, 2001. The FHP was shut down by 2002 by the CCF.

23. An older sibling is referred to and addressed in kinship terms that reflect this relationship with the speaker. Thus *bardi* or *barda* means eldest sister or eldest

brother; *mejdi* or *mejda* means the next older sibling; and *chordi* or *chorda* means the third (and youngest sibling) older than oneself.

24. Matriculation involves the board examination in class 10, followed by two more years, then another board examination in class 12. The bachelor's program, which follows the second board examination, involves two statewide examinations: the first part is held after two years of college, and the second part, or final exams, after the third year.

25. I heard a distinction made by others at the basti between *chakri*, a salaried job at an office, as opposed to the general category *kaj*, simply "work." Even if the latter paid a wage, the former, as something performed in a context that carried social respect, was seen as having more status. However, as will be seen with Nayla's *kaj* as home school teacher, this kind of work also carries status and respect.

26. A pass program generally requires less time in college and is less rigorous than an honors program. The latter is comparable to a "major" in American academia.

27. Tuition here refers to special private tutorial help with problem subjects. This is expensive, yet seen as necessary (at all social class levels today) to assist students to pass their exams.

28. My work in the basti was cut abruptly short by the events of 9/11/2001, when CCF quickly withdrew after its decade and half of support for SSGS and its programs, almost certainly because of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. The FHP was closed down by 2002, and I received no explanation, when I demanded it from the CCF. The women I write of in this paper lost their jobs, and as I witnessed at one event in the summer of 2002, fundamentalist forces now offered funds for girls' education. Shahnaz worked at half-pay for a while but told me that she did so under protest—she was now expected to ask girls to veil. I myself, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, organized various informational events in the United States on Islam and women, along with other faculty at Virginia Tech and Radford University. Almost certainly because of my activities (and my work in a Muslim basti in India), I found myself under police surveillance—their cars circling my home. Correspondence with SSGS did not get to them, and neither did any other correspondence with family in India. I was also pulled out from security checks at airports in the United States and Europe at every layover on my travels to and from India, over several years. I had little option but to stop my work in the basti in that climate of fear, and also, of course, I lost my contacts at the FHP.

29. Nussbaum, *Women's Education*, 512.

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