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Marginalities, Education and the Urban

A Study of a Muslim Neighbourhood in Kolkata*

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In the prevalent modes of reckoning of the Indian middle classes, education has long remained a crucial factor in achieving social mobility and improving social status. During the period of colonial modernity, the appeal of 'modern' education had been one of the major factors that pushed many to migrate to the upcoming urban centres in hopes of securing education and accessing the new occupational opportunities presented by an expanding colonial regime. In many cases, such efforts had also helped individuals to shed the dictates of tradition and escape the deep-seated hierarchies of the Indian village. The liberating potential of modern education has since been evident in the ways it has helped individuals and communities to overcome the compulsions of class, caste, language and religion to join the modern workforce and secure employment premised on the tenets of equality and dignity. While the relationship between education and urbanity has remained deeply and historically intertwined, perceptions around what qualifies as 'desirable' education have evolved over the years in keeping with the shifts in the broader sociopolitical trends in the country.

Particularly, in the last three decades or so, neoliberal social and economic policy has made deep inroads into Indian society, once again leaving its mark on its burgeoning urban fabric. Apart from introducing 'global urban imaginaries' (Anjaria and McFarlane 2011) around consumption and lifestyle choices, it has

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also produced new bases of inequality based on digital literacy and global access that have further fragmented an already divided urban landscape. The deep inequalities thus created between the dominant and the marginal social groups are evident in the layered access they have to the city and its amenities. Education, apart from housing and healthcare, figures prominently in this discourse.

Education, given its very nature, has turned into an important site for contesting and negotiating neoliberalism. Scholars have pointed out that the neoliberal agenda has predicated itself largely on educational reforms and has worked to align teachers, parents and students from all sections of society, with privatised educational markets (Lipman 2011). This has made it further difficult to disentangle the experiences and the often-conflicting needs, desires and aspirations, of those from economically and ethnically marginalised backgrounds, around education.

Within India's urban spaces, these complexities can be located in the large-scale privatisation of education, especially at the school level, and the almost complete withdrawal of the rich and the upwardly mobile from state-sponsored education. The dwindling quality of education in public schools and the generally shrinking accountability of public education have further pushed parents, including those from disprivileged sections of society who can but ill afford it, towards some version of private schooling for their children (Nambissan 2003). Since, in the neoliberal context, 'quality education' has also assumed the unmistakable connotation of education in the English medium, it has translated into a preference on the part of parents to strive to provide English education for their children in hopes of expanding social capital and accessing mobility.

However, such developments have also meant that for a large section of the poor, 'quality education' remains a distant dream. Many among them have very little option than to fall back on state-provided education, the quality and potential of which is rather dismal. In most cases, this has led to a vast deficit in educational capabilities of the urban poor, often forcing them to regard 'education' as a disinvestment (Kabeer, Nambissan and Subrahmanian 2003) than as an opportunity for personal development and social mobility. The precariousness of the urban poor in India vis-à-vis the neoliberal market is further intensified through their social group membership. Caste and religious affiliation have time and again been identified as factors limiting communities' access to basic urban amenities (Mahadevia 2002; Dupont 2004; Vithayathil and Singh 2012). Levels of deprivation of India's urban Muslims have been particularly high (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012), and in terms of education and employment, urban Muslims have lagged behind almost every other community (Sachar Committee 2006). Persistent prejudice and spatial segregation have further turned urban Muslims

into one of the most vulnerable and excluded social groups in the country. It is within the broader context of neoliberal globalisation in urban India, and the new dimensions of marginality it has engendered, that this chapter seeks to locate the ability of marginal Muslim communities to access education.

The observations in this chapter are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a Muslim predominant neighbourhood of Kolkata, a city whose Muslim population has remained remarkably 'ghettoised' (Bose 1968). Even though I use the term 'Muslim' to refer to the corporate identity employed to describe followers of the Islamic faith, such identification is not evoked to automatically designate a homogeneous sociocultural or political attribution. The chapter, instead, draws from the methodological premise of 'embeddedness' (Jairath 2011) which recognises the wide diversities that exist among Muslims and also the specific socio-temporal settings they find themselves in, which in this case concerns the wider urban space of Kolkata. The chapter also borrows from methodological perspectives drawn from ethnographies of the South Asian city (Gandhi and Hoek 2012) which highlight the dynamism and inherent open-endedness of the city which 'are not inert backdrop(s) to the lives of … inhabitants' but 'change and morph, their instability and transformation demanding a concomitant openness to change from its inhabitants' (Gandhi and Hoek 2012: 1). The chapter therefore attempts to locate Muslim aspirations around education and 'better life' by placing them in the dynamic context of the lived worlds of their everyday lives in the city. Fieldwork was carried out between 2012 and 2014, and the narratives cited in the chapter have emerged from lengthy interactions with Muslim respondents from the neighbourhood during the time spent in the field. Even though the focus was primarily on less-privileged sections of the Muslim population, I also interacted with middle-class Muslims over their views on the overall trends of Muslim education and employment. These multiple voices, while complicating the narrative, also highlight the contextual nature of Muslim experiences in the city. In presenting the data, care has been taken to maintain the anonymity of the respondents by altering names and addresses wherever necessary. The narratives have been translated into English by me and original statements of respondents, wherever retained, have been italicised.

The Spatial Mapping of Difference: Muslim Experiences in Kolkata

Before turning to the field, it is perhaps worthwhile to look into the historical trajectories of spatialisation of communities and mapping of social differences,

which have lent Kolkata its specific urban form as a typical South Asian city (Gandhi and Hoek 2012). As Kolkata, then Calcutta, evolved into a burgeoning metropolis under colonial rule, various in-migrating social groups came to the city in order to tap the opportunities presented by modern education and employment. On the one hand, colonial interventions in education, especially English education, had, by the mid-nineteenth century, opened up new aspirations around social mobility and progress which had drawn large numbers of young men, mostly from Bengal's countryside, into the city (Gangopadhyay 2018). On the other hand, opportunities presented by an expanding urban economy brought in practitioners of various trades, who came from across the country and settled in the city following ties of region, occupation, kinship and ethnicity. While records suggest the presence of ethnically heterogeneous middle-class localities by the mid-late nineteenth century (K. Sengupta 2017), along with provisions for tenants and mess-*bari*s (rented accommodations) for single men, one enduring feature of this large-scale in-migration was the marking out of spatial units by the regional and, more specifically, the linguistic identities of their dwellers. As colonial historians have pointed out, most localities of the native population, or Black Town, could be identified by the principal occupations of their inhabitants with the suffix of *para*, *tola*, *tuli* and *bagan*, among others (Chattopadhyay 2005), employed to denote their spatial and cognitive limits.

Thus, community-based neighbourhoods had been a feature of the colonial city, and resident groups strove to maintain their own distinctiveness by instituting practices to manage their exchanges with those whose ways of life were significantly different from those of their own. This was usually achieved by limiting social interaction with 'strangers' to the domain of instrumental social bonds (Smith 2007: 8) which, in turn, resulted in a novel reconfiguration where urban space came to be coded in terms of familiarity and strangeness, with understandings of desirability premised upon perceptions of known-ness (Hansen 2013). Such reconfiguration produced novel divisions in the private and public lives of urban dwellers, which has led colonial historians to depict the city space in such contexts more as a 'domain of negotiation' between communities (Archer 2000) than as one of 'uninhibited urban intelligibility' for the average urban dweller (de Certeau 1984).

The early Muslim settlements of Kolkata can be squarely situated within this general pattern of neighbourhood formation in the city. They were not composed of collectivities that identified themselves as 'Muslims' first, but rather of groups sharing common regional linguistic and occupational profiles. Thus, Muslim glass-makers from Uttar Pradesh settled in Cossipore, milkmen from Bihar on

B. T. Road, and dealers in skin and hide from Punjab around Colootola (Siddiqui 1974). But, far from the imaginary of the Muslim 'ghetto' that now appears as an endemic feature of many Indian cities (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012), such neighbourhoods represented 'sub-communal' groupings (Chatterji 2007: 161) among Muslims at a time when religious identity was yet to become the prime signifier of identity of any social group and, by extension, the places they lived in in the city.

The transformation of some of these localities into the dense and differentiated ghetto-like structures, characterised by forced relegation, spatial segregation, insecurity and social stigma, is more an outcome of a specific logic of communalisation of social relationships that played out in the city in the years around partition. It was aided by a host of sociopolitical factors that transformed Muslims, within a brief span of time, into an undesirable, mistrustful 'other' (Pandey 1999) irretrievably altering existing social interactions between them and the Hindus of the city. It pushed the majority of Kolkata's Muslims into hitherto unexpected spatial arrangements where new modes of relating to Hindus and to the wider urban had to be worked out. The dense and heterogeneous Muslim neighbourhoods of Rajabazar, Metiabruz, Garden Reach, Chitpur and even Park Circus, which forms the site of this study, largely figure within this communal geography of neighbourhood formation in the city (Bose 1968; Chatterji 2007).

Within this altered scenario, Muslims, who were once a large and vibrant community, lost much of their prior position and privilege (Chatterji 2007). Rendered leaderless, owing to the mass emigration of influential and elite families to East and West Pakistan, Muslims who stayed back found the physical and symbolic spaces, so far available to them, irreversibly slipping their grip (Chatterji 2007). As Muslims rapidly became a minority community, they were now faced with the task of laying claims to city and re-negotiating their lives within it (A. Sengupta 2017). It has been pointed out that demands around 'right to the city' as formulated by Henri Lefebvre (1996) carry their own complexities when sought to be imposed in postcolonial contexts. There remains, for example, the possibility of multiple publics with layered access (P. Chatterjee 2006); again, one social group's 'rights to the city' might become another competing group's source of exclusion (Harms 2016). The differential access Muslims, especially ordinary Muslims, have to education therefore could perhaps be more gainfully located by framing them not solely via the language of 'rights' as found in cities of European modernity but rather by placing them in the 'lived' contexts where they are substantively perceived, pursued and sought to be realised. The next section gives

a brief outline of the neighbourhood of Park Circus, where respondents whose experiences and narratives appear in this study live and organise their lives.

A Sketch of a 'Muslim' Neighbourhood

The neighbourhood of Park Circus, where the study is set, is relatively centrally located in the city. At the time of the study, nearly three quarters of its population as per rough local estimates were composed of diverse Muslim groups while the remaining was composed of non-Muslims, including Bengali and non-Bengali-speaking Hindus, Anglo-Indians and native Christians. Despite its origin as a purely residential enclave for the city's educated and affluent Muslims in 1918 (McPherson 1974), over time, and in keeping with the general fortunes of the city's Muslim population, the neighbourhood became home to large numbers of poor, working-class Muslims who reside in the numerous illegal and semi-legal tenements that dot the neighbourhood. The numbers of the affluent and educated middle classes who had been its traditional occupants have dwindled steadily since partition, and they constitute, at present, only a small section of the neighbourhood's population.

Despite the large presence of poor slum-dwelling Muslims, Park Circus nonetheless has a rather cosmopolitan ambience. Its central location ensures that it is conveniently connected to all urban utilities and modern infrastructure. Indeed, during the day if one were to walk its principal thoroughfares, the neighbourhood would appear no different from other, more conventional, parts of the city. It is only when one ventures into its inner recesses that the ghetto-like character of the neighbourhood, spilling over with semblances of communal life, becomes apparent. Most of the localities reproduce patterns of a traditional community composed of migrants, who have settled over the years on the basis of regional and kin-based ties. The rapid increase in the number of underprivileged Muslims is borne out by the presence of slums of all sizes spilling out from every usable space in the neighbourhood. Despite their physical proximity, the poor and the lower middle classes among the Muslims inhabit a very different social world as compared to their affluent and middle-class counterparts. This is apparent in the fragmentations in social space within the neighbourhood and the very minimal levels of social interaction between the two groups. The hopes, aims and aspirations of this large section of poor and lower-middle-class Muslims, striving to survive on the throes of precarity in a rapidly transforming metropolis, form the focal point of this study.

Overview of Occupations and Employment Profile

Unlike most other Muslim pockets in the city, which can be still be identified in terms of the occupational constitution of their population, Park Circus does not have any specific trade that local Muslims subscribe to. This perhaps owes itself to the peculiar history of its inception as a residential area for affluent Muslim groups who desired to remain in close proximity to the administrative centre of the colonial White Town. Even though one finds traces of traditional Muslim family trades in pockets bearing names such as Ayenapara (neighbourhood of glass-makers), Churipara (bangle-makers) or Kasia Bagan (butchers), most of these pursuits have died out over time. Only a very small section of the local Muslims seems to find it lucrative to carry on with their traditional trades; the rest have increasingly opted for paid work either directly as wage labourers in larger enterprises specialising in the same trade or work as small-scale contractual suppliers for them.

Given its locational advantage, Park Circus also has many large- and medium-sized private business establishments. But such enterprises usually, as a matter of policy, have refrained from employing labour from within the immediate neighbourhood apprehending labour trouble since in the event of any labour dispute, local employees could potentially mobilise members of their *quam* (community) to 'create problems'. So while it is usual for informal labour markets to be centred on 'place-based' interactions between employers and workers (Shaw and Pandit 2001), perceptions around community often act as an intervening factor limiting such access for local Muslims.

On the other hand, organised government sector employment has also largely eluded Muslims. As one of my respondents, Nazmul Karim (56), a university professor pointed out that 'one could effectively count the handful of Muslims engaged as officers, police personnel or doctors in the state or central government services'. Stories of disillusionment and cynicism abound, and several of my respondents referred to a 'systematic prejudice' displayed against Muslim candidates by selection committee members as the main reason behind their failure to secure such jobs.

As a result, there is little option for the ordinary Muslim than to fall back on the informal economy of the city where despite the ready availability of employment, work is temporary and, in general, ill-paid. Given the limited scope of the local informal economy, Park Circus can rather be viewed as a net supplier of relatively cheap labour vis-à-vis the city. One indicator of this is that a large section of the local slum dwellers is either first- or second-generation migrants who have come to the city in search of work. Having no specialised trade, they work as daily

wage labourers by acquiring basic on-the-job skills and use kin networks to find accommodation in the city. In the many slums of Park Circus, migrant Muslims from various districts of Bihar, Jharkhand and eastern Uttar Pradesh live in more or less continuous stretches along with their regional kin groups. While some of them are old tenants, many of the more recent migrants are men living in shared rooms whose families have stayed back in the village. Besides, Park Circus also has a number of Bengali Muslim migrants who come from adjacent districts for finding work; they live in rented holdings in the local slums during the week, returning to their homes for holidays or when work is scarce.

Another way by which the neighbourhood provides cheap labour is through the abysmally low-paid piecemeal jobs that a large section of slum-dwelling families, especially women, engage in to supplement their meagre family incomes. Such work includes a range of commissions of comparatively low-skill tasks such as fixing bulb holdings, packing tobacco, embellishing *bindi*s to the more difficult and time-consuming exercises of embroidery, knitting, tailoring and *zari* work. Contracts are usually put out by entrepreneurs from other parts of the city who transfer the raw materials to the slum dwellers, who then complete the assignment from their own homes in return for money. But given the long chain of middlemen involved, the earnings are dismal despite the long hours demanded by the tasks. The abundant supply of cheap labour, especially of disprivileged women, and the general unawareness of minimum wages or workday guarantees have further meant that there is little any worker can do in terms of bargaining with the contractor.

Again, access to finance in the form of bank loans are limited. Several pockets of the neighbourhood were, in fact, said to fall within the 'blacklisted' categories of banks because of repeated 'non-recovery' of loans. Even though there are a few private organisations who lend money outside of banks, their systems of guarantee are very exacting and interest rates astronomically high. Thus, locals generally refrain from taking out loans with them except in the event of emergencies.

For those who venture outside the neighbourhood for work, the realities seem far from pleasant. Studies of the Indian labour market, especially the informal sector, have shown how segmentary it is and how difficult it remains for workers to find employment without contacts (Harris-White 2002). Being 'Muslim' only further complicates the situation and makes it far more challenging to find work in the city. Several of my respondents recounted occasions when they had to use fake Hindu names, conceal other obvious pointers to religious identity and even suppress residential addresses in order to secure work in the Hindu-operated businesses in the city. Many of them pointed to the fact that in the

middle-level jobs, there remains an enduring association of traditional patterns of thought with the Islamic way of self-presentation, which is persistently met with disapproval at the workplace.

The multiple ways in which the social dynamics of the city has worked over the years to limit gainful employment opportunities for the larger part of the neighbourhood's Muslims, forcing them to join ranks of the swelling informal economy, becomes apparent here. Even then, their chances are limited owing to their perceived religious identity and the fact that they reside in a stigmatised urban space. On the other hand, successive phases of neoliberal development in the city (P. Chatterjee 2004; Donner 2012) have also left their mark on the neighbourhood's inhabitants. The burgeoning sites of consumption in the shape of glittering shopping malls, swanky flyovers, privatised star-rated schools and hospitals that flank the neighbourhood have presented new understandings of a desirable lifestyle to the average lower-middle-class urban dweller. The sections that follow attempt to understand Muslim perceptions around a 'good life' (Gupta 2011) in the changing city and the ways in which education appears as an avenue for achieving it.

Perceptions around 'Middle Class-ness', 'Good Education' and 'Better Life'

Muslim demands around development and social mobility in India have traditionally been framed in the language of identity even though recent literature on the subject suggests that there has been a gradual movement towards more secular concerns where issues of better education, housing, healthcare, respectable employment and greater participation in public life have gained significance. India's Muslims, as has been pointed out, want better jobs; they want good schools for their children and the ability to live 'normal' lives in safe and healthy neighbourhoods (Gupta 2011). It appears that Muslims as a group are keen to shed the minority tag, to leave behind the 'politics of grievance' that has marked the community since independence and join the national mainstream.

In India's urban centres, Muslims, just like their other religious counterparts, are exposed to a rapidly changing socio-economic milieu complete with the promises of modern cosmopolitan life. With large-scale entry of multinational companies and the simultaneous growth of a transnational media and consumption culture in the country, new economies of desire have developed. Boundaries between 'traditional India' and the 'modern West' have broken down and a new self-image as a modern global player has emerged among urban Indians. Within this

self-image, the modern Indian citizen is one who is educated, aware, confident and articulate, has acquired new and 'westernised' tastes (Savaala 2010), and is remarkably knowledgeable about opportunities of self-development and advancement (Beteille 2013). In this view, the modern Indian citizen is one who has worked to create a new India, carefully set apart from the old, recasting all that they seek to leave behind in 'new imaginaries of otherness' and difference (Kaur 2013). It is this expanding middle class in Indian cities, defined primarily in terms of its consumption patterns, that has emerged as a new 'moral majority' (Deshpande 2006) who play a substantial role in defining what good education, healthcare and styles of life should be like in the country.

In terms of education, in particular, the ability to learn and speak in English and possess a general command over the language has become one of the most sought-after goals of this class – one which fits well with the new employment opportunities generated by the neoliberal regime (Majumdar 2017). The relatively lacklustre school education policies in West Bengal under the three decades of left rule, and its rather delayed awakening to the changing demands in education, have, over the years, paved the way for the privatised English-medium education, especially at the school level (Rana 2005). Among other things, it created a homogenised understanding of what education should be like across classes, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who, along with their efforts of achieving a comfortable middle class-ness, appear to be convinced about the necessity for 'good' (usually 'private') English-medium schooling for their children.

In Park Circus, only the small section of the affluent and the middle classes among Muslims bear the ability to provide 'good' English-medium education for their children. Schools such as La Martinière, Don Bosco, Mahadevi Birla and Calcutta International, which lie at close quarters, while boasting global standards of education, are primarily for-profit institutions with an extremely steep fee structure. Even mid-range schools such as Our Lady Queen of the Mission, the Seventh Day Adventist, Apeejay School and Saifee Hall also fall well beyond the means of the average Muslim. Nonetheless, given the discursive constructions around an aspirational middle-class identity, many among the poorer sections of the neighbourhood's Muslims have increasingly come to perceive private education in the English medium as the primary pathway to success. Such demands are usually met by the several small- and medium-scale, comparatively more affordable, privately run English-medium schools, that have come up in the neighbourhood.

As Nazima (43), a social worker who accompanied me in many of my excursions around the neighbourhood slums and a mother of two school-going daughters, put it,

> It is not easy for us to send them to such a school … but at least they will learn *English*. That is very important.... They learn [how to use] computers. They can get a good job when they grow up.

Nazima and her husband, who works as an assistant to a local real-estate developer, have often defaulted in paying the school fees of her daughters. Once, the elder daughter had to be taken out of school in the sixth standard and could only resume her studies two years later through the intervention of the local ward councillor who managed to access a trust fund which helped pay for her tuition.

Many families in similar circumstances seem to be readily subjecting themselves to enormous uncertainties in order to provide a 'good' education for their children. The story of Arifa (37), a seamstress, and her husband, Imran (41), a contractual matador driver, further substantiates the point. The couple, who live in a local slum, have three children, all of whom go to various local English-medium schools. Their monthly fees add up to INR 3,100, apart from which there are other expenditures to be incurred on transport, lunch and private tuition. Despite the precarity of their situation, the couple have strong reasons behind such educational choice for their children. Arifa explained:

> This is almost impossible for us but government schools are not good…. There are many problems, teachers don't come, students don't learn to talk in *English*. We are trying our best…. We cannot afford to send our children to college…. But if we can support them through their 12th standard, they will at least find some decent job…. They can work in call centres; be front desk managers … they can even save for further education.

English-medium education in private schools seems to have become the only avenue for accessing upward mobility for sections among the neighbourhood's Muslims who 'somehow' manage to afford it up to the senior secondary level for their children. Even for those families which cannot, there remains a desire to provide such education at least up to the primary level to as many children as possible, after which they can move to apprenticeships which accept candidates with elementary education.

Identities, Education and the Urban

Even though many urban Muslim families living on the edge think otherwise, opinions at the level of educational policymaking vis-à-vis Muslims have still largely remained circumscribed within questions of identity. Two issues that have routinely figured in discussions on Muslim education in West Bengal concern the modernisation of madrasa education and Urdu as the preferred medium of instruction. Debates around the necessity to improve madrasa education by bringing about changes in the curriculum to make it at par with mainstream education and expanding madrasa infrastructure have repeatedly found mention within successive state policies (Aleaz 2005). Similarly, the institution of Urdu as a minority language and the setting up of Urdu-medium schools to cater to the requirements of Muslim students to expand their social capital have also cropped up routinely both within academic literature (Alam 2011) as well as in official discourses on Muslim education.

However, as recent enquiries have shown, only a small section of Muslim children actually avail themselves of madrasa education (Sachar Committee 2006). Especially within urban centres, the proportion of Muslim children attending madrasas is even less. Even the concerted efforts of the state government in opening up the madrasa curriculum in institutions affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education failed to achieve expected results. Rather than improving the lot of Muslim students from disadvantaged backgrounds, madrasas became sites where economically weaker sections from other communities such as Scheduled Caste (SC) Hindus and Scheduled Tribes (STs) crowded together – a fact attributed to the generally dismal conditions of schooling available to such groups in the state.

The implementation of Urdu as the medium of instruction in schools in Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods has been another site of contention. In keeping with the minority policies pursued by mainstream political parties, successive governments have progressively put an emphasis on opening Urdu-medium primary and secondary schools in Muslim-predominated areas. This step, often referred to as 'the ghettoisation of Urdu', has once again gone against the aspirations of many ordinary Muslims for whom an exclusive Urdu education often becomes an impediment in the carrying out of everyday activities (Vaugier-Chatterjee 2005).

In Park Circus, while Muslims across social classes seem to value the learning of Arabic for their children as a means of developing an appreciation of their culture, such learning is more often than not seen as a supplement to mainstream education. Each has its own relevance; while English education is perceived as

a necessity to participate in the social mainstream, Arabic becomes a medium of ensuring that cultural patterns of life are maintained.

While upwardly mobile families naturally seem to prefer mainstream education for their children, the aspirations are, as we have seen, not very different among the lower middle classes and sections of the slum-dwelling poor. The keen awareness of Muslim parents of the potential capacity of mainstream education to improve their children's lives in terms of acquiring skills, training and manners, and hence better job opportunities, vis-à-vis madrasa or Urdu-medium education has previously been explored in the context of Muslims in Bijnor in rural Uttar Pradesh (Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery 2007). Ordinary Muslims in Park Circus, especially those who find it difficult to afford English education for their children, point out that in West Bengal the relevance of Urdu education is indeed very minor, since all official paperwork is either in Bengali or in English. Given this, there is little to be gained by pursuing schooling in an Urdu-medium school, other than learning Arabic, which can anyway be picked up by going to the madrasa in the morning or from the many local *maulvi*s (learned teachers of Islam). As Mansoor (43), who runs a tailoring shop on Bright Street, explained,

> We are poor people.... How can I send my sons to English schools? Even Modern Day [a local English medium school] charges 800 rupees per month up to the eighth standard and even more afterwards..... But the government talks of Urdu schools. They should open English medium schools, with good teachers ... so that even our children can get a good education. Learning Urdu will not help you get a job.

Azeem Khan (39), a carpenter, whose family is originally from a district in eastern Bihar, shared similar views. As he put it,

> This is not Hyderabad. Children need to learn to read and write Bengali … but these days even Bengali is not enough. You need to know English and computer for everything now. Then you can work as an accountant, a sales executive ... or even at a call centre. All of them require English.

While at one level such responses highlight ordinary Muslim aspirations for a comfortable urban middle-class existence organised around 'good' education and respectable employment, at another level they also signal a shift in discourse from identity-related concerns towards issues of development and increased access to the mainstream of social life.

Educational Aspirations, Job Market Realities

Some of the key issues that emerged during the course of my interactions with the locals primarily derived from the depressing reality of state-sponsored education in the city. Concerns ranged from the non-availability of good schools to the lack of state support for underprivileged children and the persistent dearth of well-trained and committed teachers. This has led to an increasing dependence on private education, which with its prohibitive fee structures seems to increasingly slip from the grasp of the average Muslim. As Md Salim (42), who runs a van for school children, explained,

> My daughter is in the seventh standard at the [Government] Girls' School. But her teachers don't turn up regularly … and we cannot go to the principal and ask. They do not entertain us and if they do, they say [the said] teacher has gone for this or that meeting…. How is the child to learn?

He further elaborated:

> The government says they have scholarships for us [minorities]. But look at the amount. You get only twelve hundred rupees a year and then you need to have five hundred rupees in the account. What is the point…. Also, you get scholarship only in government schools. There are no scholarships for [private] English schools.

Again, the details regarding scholarship schemes, availability of financial assistance, eligibility criteria and procedures for applying are beyond the know-how of an ordinary person. For this, they have to depend largely on the local councillor's initiative and goodwill of the party and social workers (Manor 2017) who keep them informed regarding such schemes. But this usually comes with the additional cost of being an active participant in the 'everyday politics' of the neighbourhood (A. Chatterjee 2019). Besides, given the general nonchalance and, at times, incapacity of the local administration, it is difficult to predict the extent to which policy initiatives of the government will translate into practice. As a local-level administrative functionary put it,

> You are a researcher … you will be aware of such things…. But here realities are very different. Do you know the amount of work we have to do? It is impossible to find out what is available where and follow up.

Given the limitations of state-provisioned education, parents have no option than to turn to private providers. Even here, the almost hegemonic control of the middle classes in terms of defining the contours of 'good' education presents a major structural impediment. Scholars such as Geetha Nambissan (2010) and Henrike Donner (2012), among others, have compellingly demonstrated the ways in which these classes, along with the state, act as 'co-producers' of the urban educational reality and define what a 'proper education' should be like. Writing about the rising educational 'parentocracy' in Kolkata, Manabi Majumdar (2017) has pointed out that it is only the upper- and upper-middle-class parents who have a sway over the school education system by dominating the teachers and the school administration and defining the parameters of 'educational success'. Poor and lower-middle-class parents have little agency and end up following a homogenised model handed down from above.

Many of my respondents pointed out that, besides the steep fee structure, getting children enrolled in any of the decent English-medium private schools requires certain social skills: 'contacts', the ability to pay 'donations' and also arrange for other kinds of assistance, both monetary and non-monetary. Salema (29), who works as an *anganbari* cook,[1] put it rather bluntly:

> Thankfully my son's name came up in the lottery … but the school also interviews parents. We were so worried.… But my husband [a bookkeeper] can talk in English. So, we managed…. But my friend could not. So, her son missed out [despite getting through the lottery].

Donations and non-monetary forms of assistance seem to be common ways of raising money for these mostly for-profit institutions. Whereas rich and upper-middle-class parents are usually able and eager to maximally employ all kinds of resources at their disposal, to ensure their children's enrolment into prestigious 'star'-rated schools (Majumdar 2017), such requirements become overly burdensome in contexts where parents of meagre means scrimp and save to raise the required sum for getting their wards enrolled into schools. As Shaheen (37), a seamstress at a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that supplies school uniforms explained,

> When I went to pick up the admission form, the principal enquired if I could arrange for a certain number of school uniforms every year at a lower rate for the school to sell in its yearly package…. I am only a worker; it is only because *didi* [her manager] agreed and worked it out with the principal that the school admitted three of our children.

Such clandestine arrangements aside, the very fact of being Muslims and residing in Park Circus further impedes their access to such schools. As Rehanna (34), an *ayah*[2] in a local nursing home, who has managed to get her son admitted to Modern Day School, put it,

> They prefer Bengalis [meaning Hindus] and Christians. They never come out with a clear list. When we enquire someone simply asks for the names and addresses of our wards and asks us to come back later.

Even the few missionary schools in the neighbourhood which have English as the medium of instruction require the students to be Christians to be eligible for financial aid. This further impedes underprivileged Muslim students' access to such schools.

The gaps left behind by the inability of the state to deliver 'good' education to the underprivileged, coupled with urban middle-class imaginaries around desirable education, have opened up space for the growth of a differentiated market within privately provisioned education (Nambissan 2012; Menon 2017). In Park Circus, this has resulted in the mushrooming of a number of dubious low-fee English-medium schools geared towards a low-income market which compromise heavily on infrastructure and quality of education. Officially unrecognised – since they fail to meet the standards laid down by the State Education and the Right to Education Act (2009) – these schools nonetheless emerge in poor neighbourhoods where they find a ready market. They are also prone to frequent closures due to lack of funds which can lead to a loss of an academic year or, in some cases, force students to appear as private candidates for board examinations, despite their families having borne the heavy burden of fees throughout the schooling period.

Another way in which privatised education has reached students from modest backgrounds in the neighbourhood has been through private tuitions and coaching centres. Scholars working in the area have pointed out the large extent to which supplementary private tutoring for succeeding in examinations has created 'shadow economies' of education in Kolkata (Majumdar 2014). While such discourses around 'success' have shifted the focus from a rights-based view of education towards a choice-based view, where upper-middle-class understandings of good education based on 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2003) predominate, ordinary Muslims of Park Circus rarely have the means to pursue such goals. However, for many, sending children to private coaching centres becomes an added burden they can ill afford to shed in the absence of competent and committed teachers in schools. As Md Salim explained,

> The rates are so high…. Till the eighth standard you pay 1,500 for mathematics, science and English. And after that it varies by individual subject. Maybe thousand rupees each…. But how else will she [his daughter] pass?

The problem gets further exacerbated where teachers of private English-medium schools themselves offer private tuitions after school hours for an extra fee. Falling outside the purview of any state regulation that prohibits them from doing so, private coaching becomes a lucrative business to many who usually receive meagre salaries from the institution. In such cases, not attending private tuitions might often translate into extreme peer pressure and, at times, poor performance in examinations at school.

A rather new development in the field of education in the neighbourhood concerns the emergence of 'model' English-medium schools aimed at students from Muslim families. Possibly an outcome of the dynamics of conscious neoliberal place-making on the part of upwardly mobile Muslims (Karaman 2013), these schools offer mainstream education along with lessons in Islamic theology. While following national-level syllabi (Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations [CISCE, New Delhi] or Central Board of Secondary Education [CBSE]) within highly up-to-date, technologically equipped settings comparable to any 'star-rated' school, they also advertise their 'unmatched' theology courses developed in consultation with leading Islamic scholars. These institutions generally have steep fee structures but appeal to those Muslim families who, while being in a position to afford 'good' mainstream education for their children, are not necessarily averse to the idea of religious education when imparted alongside conventional education within the framework of formal schooling. But such institutions are barely suitable alternatives for children from poor and lower-middle-class backgrounds in the neighbourhood.

Given the existing shortage of accessible educational facilities, many among the poorer Muslims in Park Circus find it pragmatic to withdraw their children, especially sons, from school at an early age and put them into apprenticeships and vocational training courses. The persistent inability on part of Muslims to find feasible employment in the regulated sector has turned instrumental skill development in sundry trades into far safer avenues of earning an assured income. Thus, picking up *zari* work,[3] tailoring or carpentry skills or learning to drive, use computers and train as mechanics, electricians and plumbers appears to be more realistic avenues for accessing livelihood for an average slum-dwelling Muslim. Though not comparable to wages in the regulated sector, these trades provide compensations a notch or two higher than totally unskilled manual jobs

and also allows some to access the seeming advantages offered by the burgeoning 'gig-economy'.

In the course of my interactions with the locals, I often came across the refrain 'Mussalman ko naukri kabhi nahi milega' (roughly translates to 'Muslims will never find employment'), a frustration rendered obvious in the context of the glaring lack of reservation benefits available to marginal Muslims as compared to Dalits and other backward social groups. While many families living in dire economic circumstances try to evade future unemployment by tapping the lower rungs of the neoliberal job market through 'good' basic education (Sen 1990), others prefer to opt for vocational skilling for their children to improve their chances of securing a livelihood. However, it is perhaps too early to surmise that such trends have overtaken the positive evaluation of 'good' English-medium schooling. Similar studies undertaken elsewhere have indeed pointed out the strong cultural value that unemployed and underemployed Muslim youth often impute to education without immediately relating it to job market successes – a fact that also bears out the resilience of the neoliberal rhetoric of development at the local level (Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Jeffrey 2004). Nonetheless, the sense of deprivation generated by the growing deficit in social capital through education is increasingly becoming all too visible among the poor and lower middle classes among the Muslims of Park Circus, with few pointers otherwise.

Conclusion

For the large sections of the poor and less-privileged Muslims of Park Circus, everyday reality lies in a series of negotiations where they grapple with prejudice and discrimination, backwardness and insecurity, within a rapidly transforming urban milieu. At the same time, neoliberal conceptualisations of self-development and aspirations around a consumption-oriented middle-class identity have appealed to the ordinary Muslim just as they have to any other average urban dweller. It is within this context that education, with its potential of increasing social capital and facilitating social mobility, has emerged as an important site for laying claims to a better life on part of marginal Muslim groups of the city.

Whereas India has made 'free and compulsory' education a fundamental right for all its citizens (Right to Education Act, 2009), the limitations of the language of 'rights' and 'equal access' in contexts such as this becomes evident here. New ethnographies of urban infrastructure, which have in recent years moved beyond the scope of technology and materiality, have increasingly drawn attention to the reality of differentiated access to systems of knowledge and meaning, of ideas and power, as they circulate in urban space (Larkin 2013).

The persistent inability of certain groups to access urban infrastructure such as standard education, safe and clean residential spaces, reliable electricity, and safe and regular water supply indicate, among others, the fundamental 'reversibility of citizenship gains' to be found in such contexts (Anand 2017: 194). In the case of the less-privileged Muslims of Park Circus, impediments to what qualifies as 'good' and 'desirable' education display the far-from-complete realisation of the substantive rights of citizenship, which show no automatic correspondence with the formal guarantees of citizenship otherwise available to them. Within the framework of postcoloniality, such instances have been described as narratives 'of a differentiated, politically negotiated application of the rule of freedom to the urban population' which 'recognised the democratic claim to equal rights in the post-colonial nation state, but differentiated between those who were proper citizens and those who were not' (P. Chatterjee 2006: 181). This perhaps explains the overt reliance of poorer Muslims on the structures of the everyday state, of which 'Aunty' (the municipal councillor), the local school principal and the social workers are immediately relevant functionaries, to access 'good' education. This perhaps also explains why routine political interventions in education premised on perceptions of identity-based claim-making often fail to find resonance for Muslims from disprivileged backgrounds.

South Asian cities, especially those with a colonial past, have tended to display fragmented spatialities (Chandavarkar 2009), which emerged as a consequence of colonial interventions in town planning which organised populations by sorting between 'White' and 'native' quarters, as well as of vernacular modes of managing the everyday inhabitation of diversity in urban space during the time. Successive changes in political and economic regimes have imposed their own orders on the urban landscape, and Kolkata, after independence, displays more complex forms of spatial mapping of difference, with new categories of identity such as those based on religion and refugeehood now coexisting with the ones deriving from ethnic, linguistic and occupational affiliations. With neoliberalism, the growth of an aspirational middle class has further complicated the physical markings of difference, producing distinctive spatialities for those that belong to such classes.

Neoliberal taste regimes have also affected 'Muslim' neighbourhoods such as Park Circus, where apart from the obvious symbolic markers of religious identity, one can now find indicators of a global middle class-ness which seeks to segregate itself, both physically and otherwise, from its less-fortunate counterparts. This is visible in the upscale housing societies, swanky storefronts and chic restaurants that dot the neighbourhood, coexisting with pockets of decay and dereliction symbolised by the many slums and slum-like quarters which lie adjacent to them. At the same time, poorer Muslims of the neighbourhood also seem to have

been affected by the aspired modalities of neoliberal middle class-ness, which have pushed many to garner every resource at their disposal to attempt to lay claims on the wider urban landscape. Muslim negotiations around education, as discussed in this chapter, are but one instance of the many ways in which South Asia's complex urban dynamic, aided by the neoliberal logic functions, sieve and sort populations, favouring some who can manage to keep up with its pace while pushing others relentlessly into the swelling margins of the city's social life. While economic backwardness figures centrally in the question of access, being 'Muslim' and therefore being susceptible to widespread social prejudice only amplifies the experiences of marginalisation of the Muslim poor. It remains to be seen if the latter will continue to assign a high value to education as an avenue of assured social mobility over the long run or look for alternative avenues given the prohibitive costs that are to be borne to access 'good' education. Effective educational policy, which factors in the complex realities of socio-spatial marginalisation that poorer Muslim groups encounter on an everyday basis, will play a significant role in shaping the contours of such choice in the coming years.

Notes

1. *Anganwadi*s are centres which provide supplementary nutrition, non-formal pre-school education, nutrition and health education for economically disprivileged sections. 'Anganbari' is a colloquialisation of *anganwadi*.
2. An *ayah* refers to a help who is not trained in nursing but performs ancillary tasks in hospitals and nursing homes.
3. *Zari* is a thread traditionally made from gold or silver, used extensively for embroidery in garments in South Asia.

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