

‘Sisters under the Skin’

Events of 2002 and Girls’ Education in Ahmedabad

Even after the immediate violence has ceased, communal tension continues to exercise a vitiating influence on citizens and everyday modes of existence. This article looks at two girls’ schools in Ahmedabad, one sited in a Muslim locality and the other in a mixed dalit-Muslim populated neighbourhood, to study the impact of the events of 2002 on education. Fear and a history of violence have fostered antagonisms among different communities, while diminishing job opportunities and poverty imply that education opportunities, once available for girls, no longer exist. Denial of education, in turn, perpetuates illiteracy and trends towards an early marriage. The policies of a state government that sees communities as political votebanks have done little to restore amity between communities and faith in the state’s “secular” credentials.

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The events of 2002 in Gujarat have generally been perceived as acts of state-supported violence directed against Muslims which included mass murder, sexual abuse and large-scale destruction of property. Without doubt, this was the principal tragedy that left scars on the entire Muslim community. Yet, if we look beyond, the violence has implications for society in Gujarat as a whole, for both Hindus and Muslims, and in particular, for the girls of these communities. This paper looks at the adverse impact of the communal violence of 2002 on the education of Hindu and Muslim girls, focusing primarily on students of two municipal primary schools in two conflict-prone, poor areas of Ahmedabad – Shahpur in the walled city and Rajpur, an industrial suburb.

This paper is based on data collected as part of an ongoing comparative study of gender-related factors affecting the education of girls at the upper-primary level in municipal schools in Ahmedabad and Mumbai, supported by the Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development (IDPAD Phase V). The municipal corporation of Ahmedabad provides primary education in nine languages, though for this study three schools were selected – one in the Gujarati medium which is the principal regional language of the state, one in the Urdu medium which is increasingly regarded as the main language of the minority community and the third in the Hindi medium which is the main language used by migrants to the city. These are also the mediums of instruction that record the highest enrolment on the part of students. Between March and December 2004, we interviewed 150 girls from standards V, VI and VII and their mothers, belonging to both Hindu and Muslim families. In proportion to the total enrolment in these mediums, 108 girls were selected from the Gujarati medium schools, and 21 each from Urdu and Hindi medium schools. The Hindi medium students have not been included in this paper as the area in which the selected school

is located did not directly experience violence during 2002. The paper is also informed by the authors’ first-hand experience of having lived in Ahmedabad for the past two decades and being eyewitnesses to the events of 2002.

The study uncovered many facets of what it means to be a young girl in Ahmedabad and what it is like to be the mother of a young girl in Ahmedabad. Conversations revealed that despite social and cultural conditioning to think otherwise, mothers did see education for daughters both as a process that would widen their horizons and as a route which could take their families out of the trap of poverty and lack of opportunity. Inspired by the professional women depicted in television serials, the stories about astronaut Kalpana Chawla, girls now aspire to becoming business women, models, doctors and joining the armed forces. Within this picture of hope and ambition, a striking revelation was that for both Muslims and Hindus, deteriorating inter-community relationships along with the state’s apathy towards restoring security and promoting goodwill between communities have forced them to not aspire for anything beyond the education offered by the local Urdu or Gujarati medium municipal primary school. In such circumstances, both mothers and daughters are unable to visualise a future beyond marriage and unskilled, primarily home-based work. And the school, which could be a site for secular socialisation for future generations, itself becomes an institution for widening the distance between the communities.

Human Geography of Ahmedabad

A brief overview of the human geography of Ahmedabad is necessary to comprehend better the post-2002 situation. Shahpur, the first area focused upon in this paper is located in the old, walled part of the city established by Sultan Ahmed Shah almost

600 years ago. This walled city is characterised by narrow lanes, flanked on both sides by closely packed houses grouped into "pols". The residents of a pol often belong to one caste or community and two adjoining pols usually share a common wall. Thus different castes and communities – Hindus and Muslims, upper and lower castes, live in close proximity in these neighbourhoods. This proximity, however, has also been cause for conflict and it was the walled city where the communal conflicts usually began and escalated, later spreading to the industrial suburbs.

The industrial suburbs came into existence with the establishment of the textile industry in the late 19th century. Ahmedabad expanded on its eastern periphery when mills were set up in the outlying villages, forming an industrial suburb which was gradually subsumed into the city and became part of Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC). The workforce, which migrated from neighbouring districts and from other states, settled in chawls near the mill compounds. Two-thirds of them were dalit and Muslim and, like in the old walled city, here too they lived in close proximity. These dalit-Muslim neighbourhoods, though separate, shared a common "mill subculture" and their lives were intertwined. Rajpur, the second area selected for the study, is one such former village that was absorbed into Ahmedabad some time in the 1930s.

History of Social Conflict

This human geography and the social conflict in these areas have shaped each other. Ahmedabad has had a history of Hindu-Muslim tension since the time of Aurangzeb in the 17th century. The causes ranged from altercations during Holi celebrations to provocative behaviour during Muharram or rath yatra processions, even India-Pakistan cricket matches in recent times, which could escalate into full-fledged riots that resulted in destruction of property and loss of lives. Till the 1960s, riots hardly ever left deep scars and the two communities would soon resume business and social interaction. However, the riots of 1969 marked a turning point in Hindu-Muslim relationships in Gujarat. A process of ghettoisation set in after these riots and many Muslims moved from mixed neighbourhoods in the walled city to Muslim dominated areas in the industrial suburbs as well to areas on the southern periphery of Ahmedabad.

In 1981, upper caste Hindus began an agitation against the reservation system that gave dalits and adivasis access to institutions of higher education and to government jobs. Intense caste violence took place and the clashes between upper caste Hindus and dalits that started in industrial Ahmedabad escalated into a large-scale caste war. On this occasion Muslims supported dalits and protected them when they were attacked. Then came the violence during the second anti-reservation riots of 1985. But this time it deteriorated into communal riots; the traditional Hindu-Muslim animosity became triangular with dalits forming the third vertex. The 1990 riots precipitated by Advani's Rath Yatra further weakened the frayed social fabric. In 1985, only one high wall came up between a patidar and a Muslim neighbourhood in the old city of Ahmedabad; by the end of 1990 the residents of almost all dalit chawls in the industrial areas had erected high walls around them. At places where Muslims lived side by side with dalits, the dominant sentiment became one of fear and mistrust. The violence sparked by the demolition of the Babri masjid in 1992 was followed by sustained Hindutva

mobilisation in which the Sangh parivar systematically wooed the dalit communities in Gujarat and thus the communal divide further deepened.

It is against this background that we need to look at the impact of the events of 2002. This time the violence was more brutal, widespread and prolonged and it was marked by the overt and covert partisan role of the state – elected representatives, law enforcement agencies and the justice system. As a result hatred, mistrust and fear have intensified between the two communities and the situation appears to have reached a point when relationships cannot be repaired.

Urdu School in Shahpur

Shahpur, in the walled city, is dominated by jains, patels and Muslims. As in many other municipal wards within the walled city, there has been a striking reversal in the population profile since the 1990s. Earlier, Hindus formed 60 per cent of the population and a Muslim candidate could not hope to win a municipal election from this area. Over the last decade, many Hindu families have moved out and today, with Muslims forming over half the population, one of Shahpur's three corporators is a Muslim. AMC runs 90 Urdu medium primary schools of which nine are in Shahpur. We interviewed 21 girls from one school which was set up in 1885. Shahpur was directly affected by violence in 2002 and the premises of the school we studied had been converted into a relief camp.

Debate on Medium of Education

A majority of Muslims in Gujarat speak Gujarati at home and the debate on the medium of education for Muslims has been a long-standing one, dating to the 19th century. While one section of Gujarati Muslims favoured education in the Gujarati medium, another equally influential section believed that a Muslim's education could be considered complete only when imparted in Urdu, the language of Islamic culture. There were two outcomes of this tension between religious and regional identities. On the one hand, the Muslim community established trusts which set up a few Urdu schools and the AMC too set up Urdu medium schools. At the same time, there were other Muslim trusts which set up a larger number of Gujarati medium schools with the reasoning that from the viewpoint of job prospects, this would be more relevant. Muslim children also attended Gujarati medium municipal schools.

The events of 2002 seem to have sharpened this debate. Conversations in Shahpur indicate that the recent threat to Muslim religious identity has pushed many members of their community to prefer Urdu medium schools. As a result the general declining trend of enrolment of boys and girls in Urdu schools has shown a reversal in 2002. Our enquiries and conversations with parents and the principal of the Urdu school indicate that the reasons behind such enrolment trends are complex. Parents have been taking their boys out of municipal schools and putting them into schools run by Muslim trusts where in addition to regular academics, religious teaching is also imparted. They feel that this training will enable their sons to get jobs as 'hafiz' (religious teacher) in this country and abroad. Parents who dream of non-religious jobs for their sons in the Gulf countries feel that education in Urdu medium municipal schools is also advantageous. (Others are beginning to prefer

Gujarati medium of education for their boys as this increases their job prospects within the state.)

'Mahol' and 'Moholla'

Mothers reveal two possible reasons for the increasing enrolment of girls in Urdu medium schools. Fatima Bibi, mother of Shahnaz studying in the VIth standard revealed one of the reasons: "The tense 'mahol' or environment has now become an everyday affair. It is not just restricted to riot times. Hindu boys tease the girls or harass them on the road. I do not want to send Shahnaz far away." The Urdu medium school is usually located in Muslim dominated 'mohollas' or neighbourhoods and mothers prefer to send their girls there. We also found that good-looking girls were confined to the home more than others. The second reason for preferring the Urdu medium for girls is related to the perception that it strengthens their Muslim identity. Raziya Begum, whose daughter Rubina is in the VIIth standard, felt that, "people prefer the Urdu medium school for their girls because education in the language of Islam would make their daughter a better Muslim and therefore improve her chances of getting a groom from a 'good family'". When asked why they would not choose the trust-run religious schools as they do for the boys, the reply is that these schools charge fees and while they are prepared to pay for the boys, they are not ready to pay for the girls who are, in any case, not expected to work in the future. Thus, the calculation that investment in boys' education reaps greater economic returns becomes the deciding factor in education matters for girls and boys.

The Urdu medium municipal schools of Shahpur are only till the VIIth standard. There is only one municipal Urdu high school in far away Asarwa and going there would mean that Parvin has to travel through Hindu localities. Her mother Hamida Begum admits that learning widens the intellect but it is unlikely that she will educate her daughter Parvin (who is now in the Vth standard) beyond the VIIth standard. "I do not want to take the chance when she has 'become older'; 'something' may happen and her name will get spoilt". The high schools that are nearer are privately managed and unaffordable. And in any case reaching these too involves going through "unsafe" Hindu areas.

It is well known that it is the poorest communities that opt for municipal schooling and they can scarcely afford private schools for higher education. Many mothers reported that the prolonged curfew in 2002 meant lost wages, living on borrowed money and higher prices for food. Many are in debt and cannot afford education beyond the upper primary subsidised education available near their mohollas.

A more critical deterrent is that the nearby private schools are in the Gujarati medium. As there are very few Urdu medium secondary and high schools, education beyond upper primary would involve making a successful transition into the Gujarati medium. This is something few can cope with. The state education system has no support mechanisms for Urdu medium children interested in pursuing studies beyond the VIIth standard and poor families cannot afford private tuitions.

Being Muslim in Ahmedabad

The study revealed that the Muslim community in general sees education as a futile exercise because in the vitiated atmosphere of today's Ahmedabad, most people are unwilling to give a Muslim

a job. Hamida Begum confesses, "I would have liked to educate Parvin; if this Urdu school was upgraded to the Xth standard I would send her. She could become a teacher". She corrected herself, "But in any case, there is no point in thinking like that because who will give a job to a Muslim? What's the use of studying then?"

Finally, the Urdu medium schools, where girls outnumber the boys, have become a mirror of the ghetto the girls live in. The increasing ghettoisation of residential spaces has meant that the girls live only among people of their own community. The school is a place which could ideally become a site for secular socialisation of children. But in the context of Gujarat, Urdu is a language used only by Muslims and it is impossible that children in this school will meet children from other communities. Significantly, a Gujarati medium school is run on the same premises as the Urdu school – on two different floors of the same building, with some classes even having the same timings. Despite this, there is no interaction between the girls of these two schools. Thus, the girls of the Shahpur school live among their 'jamaat' or caste members at home and at school their fellow students and teachers are other Muslims. The school offers no possibility of exposure to a world beyond their ghetto.

In contrast to the situation for girls, Muslim boys do have the option of going to schools, Urdu or Gujarati, which are further away from their mohollas. The mahol also does not pose a threat for them as it does for girls, whose gender makes them vulnerable. For the boys, there are possibilities of wider interaction later at their workplace; for the girls there appears to be no future other than marriage. Though most mothers claimed that they entertained marriage proposals only after their daughters turned 18, we observed that the process began soon after the girls started menstruating. And the trend towards early menarche means that such talks start even earlier. Once they get engaged, girls usually drop out. A male teacher in a Muslim trust-run school reported that if engaged girls stay on in school, they are usually more interested in clothes and their looks. As for paid work, both before and after marriage, girls have access only to home-based work in the garment making, costume jewellery assembly or embroidery sectors. Traders leave raw materials at their homes and come back later to collect the finished goods and make the payment on a piece-rate basis. This system is structured around the general feelings of insecurity about the mahol and moholla and ensures that girls never need to leave their doorstep.

Gujarati School in Rajpur

The situation in Rajpur has to be seen against its own history of once close-knit and shared dalit-Muslim neighbourhoods now transformed into antagonistic Hindu-Muslim blocks. This industrial area had a number of flourishing textile mills which employed dalits, Muslims and other Hindus mainly from the middle caste groups like artisans and farmers (patels). The decline of the textile mills began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The non-dalits slowly began to leave the area in search of better economic opportunities.

This economic downturn coincided with, or was accompanied by, caste riots. Well-to-do dalits too began to move out in search of security and settled in other parts of Ahmedabad dominated by their own caste fellows. Rajpur was left with a predominantly poor dalit and Muslim population. Hindutva mobilisation in the 1990s attracted the dalit who saw in it an opportunity for better

social status. Increasingly, their self-image also involved a "Hindu" identity and the amity between an earlier generation of dalits and Muslims disintegrated. Their chawls were separated by high walls and the communal riots accompanying the Ayodhya-centred agitation of the 1990s added the mutual fear and distrust. Rajpur was also directly affected by the violence in 2002 and camps in the area gave shelter to 6,000 people. Today it is not surprising to hear frequent anti-Muslim comments from dalits in Rajpur.

The AMC runs 346 Gujarati medium schools of which 16 are in Rajpur. We interviewed over a hundred girls in one school which has been sharing the premises with an Urdu medium school for the last four years. The Urdu medium's earlier building was damaged in 2001 by the earthquake. There are almost 500 students in the Rajpur Gujarati medium school, of whom a little less than 20 per cent are Muslims while over 80 per cent are poor dalits. Middle class dalits and the few middle and upper castes living in this area send their children to private schools in Rajpur and adjoining areas.

'Border' and 'Bandobast'

The school is situated in a lane surrounded by residential dalit chawls on three sides. This lane slopes upwards for about a furlong before it meets the main Rajpur road. The area around this intersection is referred to as the "border" and the Muslim neighbourhoods located beyond this point have been referred to as "Pakistan" for the last decade at least. The police is always posted in readiness at this border during festivals and religious processions and even during recent events like the India-Pakistan cricket matches in early 2005. There is police 'bandobast' (deployment) even when the India-Pakistan matches are played outside Ahmedabad.

How is this mahol-moholla situation reflected in the schooling of girls? A point that needs to be highlighted here is that there is an adverse impact on girls of both communities. A long-standing fear psychosis prevails among both dalit and Muslim mothers of Rajpur, which has resulted in a reluctance to send girls to schools outside the moholla especially if the route to the school takes them through localities of the "other" community.

Even when the girls go to the nearby municipal school they feel compelled to escort their daughters. For instance, after the riots of 2002, Ramila accompanied her daughter Bindu to school everyday for months. She says that 'zamana' (the times) is bad now and she will educate Bindu for only two more years till she completes the VIIth standard. Mehmuda's daughter Aashiyana is now in the VIth standard and Mehmuda, like many other mothers believes that the 'mahol' has deteriorated. She says, "If there is trouble, boys can run home, but the girls will get trapped. So it is better not to send them out for too long. In any case, in our community, as soon as the girl 'grows up' we will look for a suitable match." "Of course", she adds, "we will not get her married before she is eighteen because that's the law."

Vimla, Manchhi and Dahi were some of the many dalit women, who with their families left Rajpur at the peak of the violence of 2002. They could not go to work in the mills and factories nearby and when their meagre savings ran out, they went to eat at the relief camps. Later, a few went to stay with relatives in other parts of Ahmedabad and some went to their village. Muslim mothers too shifted to live with relatives in and outside Ahmedabad.

Schools were closed for four months and the girls who relocated missed further months of school. Mayuri who was doing well academically in the Vth standard, stayed away for many months and when she rejoined, she had to drop the academic year and could not regain her scholastic excellence. She cried in her sleep and was disturbed for many months.

Living in Fear

Anjana reported that she is afraid of the slightest quarrel on the streets. Her mother Hansa says, "The most insignificant quarrel leads to abusive language and physical violence and people of both communities take to the streets. You too would be nervous if you lived here. It is enough if Anjana completes the VIIth standard." Anjana can walk through Muslim areas to nearby private schools like Democratic or Matruchhaya but Hansa would prefer her to stay at home or come to work with her. Dina, Amba, Kamla and Jyotsna say the same. Unlike Muslim mothers, many dalit women work in the nearby industrial units and would feel reassured if their daughters stayed at home while they worked. Apart from the housework for which they needed their daughters' help they feel anxiety about their daughters being molested on their way to and from a school located far away. Like Muslim girls in Shahpur, many dalit girls do craft-based work at home to supplement the family income. A few accompany their mothers to help in work outside the home. On the whole, restrictions on leaving the home are less for dalit girls, but the mahol-moholla factor effectively restricts their access to education beyond primary level.

There are other complicating dimensions. For instance, dalit girls in the Gujarati school go home if they need to use the toilet. Of course the school toilets are in a state of disrepair and there is no water supply but that is not the reason offered by the girls. They claim that they do not go to the toilets because Muslim boys peek at them from above. And how do they know the boys are Muslim? They answer that the toilets are near the school compound wall and beyond the wall are Muslim chawls, so the boys must be Muslims. Not one of the girls has seen the boys and nobody has investigated this story but all the girls believe it and prefer to go home for a visit to the bathroom. No one among the teachers has made any effort to address this issue or allay fears of the girls and put an end to such interruptions during school hours.

It is not surprising to hear descriptions of feelings of fear and mistrust from Muslim girls and their mothers given the scale of violence on Muslims in 2002. The significant aspect that seems to go unnoticed is that among the Hindus too, i.e., girls from the marginalised dalit communities, have been equally affected adversely by the fear psychosis resulting from communal hatred.

Presence of Police

This fear of violence erupting at any time exists not just in the women's imagination. The area is considered so sensitive by the administration that the Rajpur Gujarati medium school is a police point. The first room of school building has been given over to the police for their use and there is round-the-clock police presence on the school premises. And this has been not just since the 2002 riots. It has existed since the 1980s' anti-reservation stir and communal riots that followed except for a few phases in between when the police presence was withdrawn. In fact

for the last 25 years there has been a uniformed, armed policeman quartered at the school to keep an eye on the locality. Two generations of students have attended school in such circumstances.

In our day-to-day observations during the study period, children did not appear to pay much attention to the policeman on duty. Yet, significantly, during interviews, more Muslim girls reported their fear of the police in general. Farhin of the VIth standard summed up the sentiments of many Muslim girls when she said that she felt afraid of the policeman. Afsana confessed that after 2002 she was afraid even of female police personnel because they had conducted home searches at that time. Children, teachers and the administration have internalised the situation to such an extent that no one thinks about whether or not it is appropriate to have the continued presence of uniformed law enforcement personnel in the learning environment of young people.

Interactions between Communities in School

Even if neighbourhoods are antagonistic, one would imagine that the school could be a site for secular socialisation. The Urdu school of Shahpur of course does not offer such a chance because its students are all Muslims. But we found that the Gujarati school of Rajpur was scarcely different though it has students from both communities. Teachers reported that the numbers of Muslim girls in the school dropped after the 2002 riots but they had not made the effort to find out whether they had dropped out altogether or had joined the Urdu school on the floor above. The administrative structure of the municipal school system is such that Urdu schools and Gujarati schools belong to different administrative "zones". Their inspectors are different and the teachers in the two mediums of instruction do not formally need to meet each other. Informally too, the teachers in the two schools keep to themselves and have no more than a nodding acquaintance with each other. The children and teachers in the Gujarati and Urdu medium school use different entrances to the building and, on the whole, inhabit different worlds.

The teachers prefer not to discuss the events of 2002 in the class. "It is better we do not remind them of it; it is over and done with," says the Vth standard teacher, Lakshmi. "Of course we tell them that all of us should live together peacefully". We did not observe partisan behaviour among the children toward the Muslim students though the classroom interaction we observed was obviously influenced by our presence and could hardly be classified as representative of what normally transpired in the class. None of the teachers are Muslim, some are dalits or dalit-Christians and the others were from the middle Hindu castes. But repeated probing during conversations with the girls revealed that the teachers did not discriminate against Muslim children in any way. Yet, when we left to conduct interviews at the girls' homes many teachers warned us to be "careful" when we went to Muslim households.

We asked the girls to name close friends at school and not one dalit child named a Muslim child and neither did the reverse occur. We found that Muslim children play in their groups and the Hindus in their own. Also, there is no interaction between the Urdu and Gujarati medium schools even though their timings are the same and the recess time is the same. Neither do the children play together, nor do the teachers make any efforts to encourage them to mix. Very few girls manage to transcend these

barriers; there are exceptions such as Bharti in the VIIth standard who responded poignantly that Niloufer was her friend but she could not visit her at home. They could only meet and play in school.

Role of the State

As mentioned earlier, in circumstances of widening distance between the two communities, the school is perhaps the only place where children could come together, transcending their religious differences to build bonds of friendship and understanding. Though the creation of a secular society is one of the declared aims of the state, as is the promotion of fraternity, the state in Gujarat has responded to the sharpening of communal identities in a dubious way. Within the two years in which we have been involved in this research, four Urdu schools have been closed down. The administration cites declining enrolment in Urdu schools as the reason for this. On its part the Muslim community sees it as a motivated move to deprive them of access to education.

Community members and teachers feel that vacancies in Urdu schools are deliberately being left unfilled. This seems quite likely because Muslim trust-run Gujarati medium schools (which are aided by government grants) too report that the government has not filled their teacher vacancies. Another complaint is that the administration is withholding granting formal recognition to some newly established schools run by Muslim trusts. All these reports are from Shahpur alone and only a bigger study could reveal how widespread this phenomenon is. The evidence from even this small study suggests it is a matter for concern. The deliberate insensitivity of the system to the sensibilities and priorities of the Muslim community is revealed in a move in 2004 to introduce Sanskrit as an extra language in Urdu medium schools. This again is perceived by the Muslim community as an antagonistic move.

While families see themselves as "Hindu" or "Muslim", the state regards them as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes or socially and educationally backward communities. Welfare schemes are conceptualised according to these categories and the differences in schemes for these various groups have added a further dimension to feelings of discrimination and separation. Children belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (this second category does not apply to the children covered in the study) receive more money in scholarships than socially and educationally backward communities (Muslims are included in this group). This has led to feelings of discrimination among the Muslims of Rajpur, adding to another cause for discontent.

But the most important fact emerging from this study is that the state is unable to provide the sense of security and safety needed for girls of both Muslim and dalit Hindu communities to fully access the school system. Girl children are being kept away from anything beyond the upper primary education offered in their immediate neighbourhoods. As a result the futures of girls from both communities remain circumscribed by the moholla, the mahol, puberty and poverty. **[EW]**

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[This is an expanded version of a paper presented at the Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference on 'Sovereignty, Citizenship, and Gender' at Goa, May 3-6, 2005. Additional inputs for the paper were provided by Parvin and Hansa. The names of girls and their mothers and of the teachers have been changed to protect their identity.]