

Book Review

Saheed Meo

Farah Farooqi, *Education in a “Ghetto”: The Paradoxes of a Muslim-Majority School*. Routledge: South Asia Edition, 2024, pp. 205, Price: ₹1,295, ISBN: 9781 0327 685 64 (Hardback).

The book *Education in a “Ghetto”: The Paradoxes of a Muslim-Majority School* by Farah Farooqi is an engaging ethnographic work of a school located in old Delhi. This book, in the words of the author, is a “labour of love” and an offshoot of her decade-long journey with the school as part of its management. The book has a total of nine chapters which are categorised into four parts, namely: School organisation and leadership; The children context; Children, children’s groups and teachers’ perceptions; and School functioning and changes. Throughout the text the author openly expresses her angst, the deeper dreams of “marginalised” children, and the fate of the minority community amid state apathy, the rise of right-wing politics of hate, and the global neoliberal market (Lall & Anand, 2022). The author—besides being a reflective researcher—acknowledges clinching multiple roles as a teacher, a Muslim, a woman, and a power-holding authority. She solicits these as vantage points in her critically nuanced reading of school operations in the face of tough childhoods and erratic learning trajectories, bureaucratic humdrum, power politicking, esoteric “ghettoised” *mohallas* (localities), community aspirations, and the grim realities of a neoliberal market.

School, Ghetto, and Power Dynamics

The first part of the book introduces the school, its locale, and the web of power relations within it. Mushfiq Memorial School has a rich historical past yet its geographical location, systemic neglect, dilapidated buildings, open urinals, and the filth and garbage around it make it a marginalised institution. The school is managed by Jamia Millia Islamia and run under the Delhi Government’s Department of Education. It is mainly attended by Muslim children from various *mohallas*. Majority of these children (65%) work in *karkhanas* (factories). The school lacks required

amenities, and perhaps the requisite desire and skills for delivering quality education too. After such deficient schooling, children are often forced to be at the mercy of the market by taking on hazardous and insecure jobs in *karkhanas*, workshops, and call centres. Noticing a structural similarity between the school and the ghetto, the author indicates that the persistent deficiency of both the right to education and right to city is unlikely to help children liberate themselves from excruciatingly oppressive ghettos and fulfill their dream of a better future.

The school operates in sync with the wider social, embedded within power dynamics, hierarchies, and domineering egos which often result in unfair and pressurised decision making, disturbed interpersonal relations, and manipulated and superficial measures to deal with difficult situations. Preconceived notions and the absence of communication restrict the self from performing and doing creative work. Power play, showing off, and pressure tactics are seen as the best ways to get work done and ensure control, thereby undermining the role of simplicity, informality, and interpersonal collegiality. “Bowling-to-boss” has become the tradition to avoid work, retain the status quo, and gain undue benefits. The author delineates that the ideal construct of school as a purely bureaucratic model is disturbing, as this is unlikely to impart real learning, or appreciate the sociopolitical contexts, or encourage children’s intellectual growth. Rather, the author believes that the school should be imagined as “a ‘live’ institution, with its curriculum and operations in sync with grassroot realities, with space for open dialogue, ethical democracy, and conscientiousness to bring the change” (p. 21).

Children, *Mohallas*, and Market

Parts two and three examine the children’s world, their childhood, everyday life at school and in *mohallas*, and its linkages with the market. The author painstakingly unravels how children’s lives are caught in the thick of everyday livelihood struggles, *mohallas*, market, and politics, as they aspire to survive and grow in the “ghetto” of the global neoliberal city of Delhi. Families and children are typically engaged in hazardous work in a cramped, single-room home-cum-*karkhana*. Conflict, chaos, and confusion are embedded in their work and ghettos where they are forced to live due to their miserable economic conditions and the threat of religious discrimination.

Just like the school, the *mohallas* lack facilities and remain victims of state neglect. Many *mohallas* around the school were earlier engaged in the meat business. Subsequently, they were stereotyped and discreetly subjected to discrimination by rightist politics of hate. This led to Muslims being vilified, their culture being demeaned, and the population relegated to the status of second-class

citizens. Ghettoised Muslims, though, are considered “new human resources” and made to serve the interests of the neoliberal “capital” (pp. 64–66). The school is seen as a source of “hope” for the community to remain relevant in the neoliberal market by helping them reskill themselves and climb the ladder of social mobility, which can enable them “to escape the destiny that lies in wait for them in the poisonous locality” (Seabrook & Siddiqui, 2011, p. 41).

Most Muslims families whose children go to Mushfiq Memorial School are migrants and camped in unhygienic “ghettos”, hardly earning enough. Devoid of financial security and leisure time, most families are unable to help their children scholastically and emotionally. Parental sustenance and children’s schooling are squarely tied to the ups and downs of the market. Parents are often forced to withdraw their children from school and engage them in work. Moreover, working children are ridiculed for continuing their schooling. Lack of support structures at home and inadequate appreciation and attention at school leaves these children high and dry. In fact, at times it is their employers who offer them more empathy and solace in the crisis-ridden, everyday life, while also remaining exploitatively lucrative, killing their childhood, and closing progressive avenues for them.

Working children start acting like adults, reflected in their mature abilities of negotiation, persuasion, humour, and notions of honour and religious identity (p. 92). The author underscores the fact that the school—blind to socioeconomic contexts—expects too much from children and seamlessly imposes disciplinary strictures on them. Furthermore, persisting primordial kinship rules, norms and “poor and unhygienic” familial set ups in ghettos create roadblocks to children’s educational growth. For instance, early marriages and long absences from school due to visiting relatives, celebrating festivities, and religious ceremonies often force children to drop out or attain poor scholastic growth. Besides market upheavals, the prevalence of both natural and human-made calamities such as negligence, illness, and deaths in the ghettos constricts the lives and academic growth of children.

Religion, Gender, and Everyday Social Milieu

In the last part of the book, the author sagaciously delves into the operation of multiple roles, selves, and identities that run parallel to the everyday social milieu of the school. Groups, individuals, students, and teachers operate from different vantage points. Various forms of honour and dishonour, dreams and humour, patriarchy, showing off, cultures and countercultures characterise the realm of schools—inside and outside. The author underscores how normative

contexts of what is good and bad are interpreted in these different realms, but in the light of *Taleem* and *Tableeghi* engagement taking place in Mushfiq Memorial School, religion remains a substantial source of value generation. Religion seems to outweigh the school's efforts in providing hope, raising one's self-esteem, foregrounding morality, fostering a sense of helping each other, and strengthening interpersonal bonds. Religion provides courage, self-esteem, and the hope to move on, but it may also demotivate children from raising questions or from rising against injustices perpetrated under the guise of religious etiquette. The fear of creating fanatical tendencies also looms large, especially when hate, violence, and religious exclusion are maliciously manufactured, touted, and foisted upon the community.

Deeply embedded binaries of religion, caste, class, and regional stereotypes shape the everyday social milieu of the school. Teachers' labelling of—and the system's apathy towards—children often relegate them to the margins, forcing them to turn into dupes of low self-esteem who dare not question the system and its injustices. Children also label each other as their social baggage deepens. This is detrimental because working children need special attention, but they end up being castigated in the distinctions made between manual and intellectual labour. Religious and class identities are reproduced, and the categories of good behaviour and superior culture are formed and furthered.

Teachers are mostly first-generation learners, having struggled in the past and overcome their difficulties with their epistemic prowess. They can play an emancipatory and creative role in awakening the dormant energies of learners and helping them attain their dreams. However, individual and institutional structures are overloaded with social baggage; they act paradoxically and fail to resolve issues. The social milieu and institutional structure of schools such as the gender committee are bound by preconceived notions. Gendered roles and behaviour are reinforced and naturalised. Students' fun-making is shaped by their patriarchal notions and a dominating fear to "save" their culture, religion, and manliness from the world of women. Women—although they can play a much more creative role—are bound to sustain the community's honour, to not offend the masculine ego, singularly maintain piety, and remain within limits as defined by their male counterparts.

In the author's own praxis-imbued journey with the school, Farooqi brought in some changes in structural and cultural aspects. Yet she ruefully notes that the mindset, beliefs, and attitudes of the people could not be changed which otherwise could have brought a breakthrough transformation

in the lives of the people. Giving space to different stakeholders, institutionalising democratic and inclusive ethos, and recognising the role of teachers and their “epistemic identity” is critical to bring desirable change (p. 188). Subtle, collective efforts not only raise teachers’ sense of pride and self-worth, but also make the higher-ups appear trustworthy and helpful.

The author revealed that with her efforts, students started to move from being passive and rowdy to active and reflective learners. Children are amenable! They—and their parents—know the worth of the institution and are willing to extend their heartfelt support to bring change. However, it is the higher-ups that have the larger responsibility to make institutions democratic and inclusive. Quick and simplistic solutions are not tenable, especially when problems are complex and deeply rooted in the overarching social structure.

The book is preceded by its earlier avatar, *Ek School Manager ki Diary* (2020) which was penned by Farooqi in mesmerising Hindustani language. With this book, the author has audaciously come up with an enriched version, engaging relevant literature, including theoretical underpinnings, and taking an intersectional approach to understand the school, its operations, and interlinkages with the wider world. Farooqi’s work is a scholarly breakthrough in exposing the causes of our failing public education system and bringing forth nuanced, empirical evidence of the largest minority population’s relegation to a miserable state. Her work will flag off soul-searching angst and conscience-awakening quests for further introspection and research among its readers.

References

- Farooqi, F. (2020). *Ek school manager ki diary* (The Diary of a School Manager). Eklavya.
- Lall, M., & Anand, K. (2022). *Bridging neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism: The role of education in bringing about contemporary India*. Bristol University Press.
- Seabrook, J., & Siddiqui, I. A. (2011). *People without history: India’s Muslim ghettos*. Navayana Publishing.