



Muslim Schools in Mumbai. Desecularization, Privatization and Segregation of Education in Urban India

S. van der Kaaij

SUMMARY (ENGLISH)

MUSLIM SCHOOLS IN MUMBAI. DESECULARIZATION, PRIVATIZATION AND SEGREGATION OF EDUCATION IN URBAN INDIA – SANNE VAN DER KAAIJ

In the decade prior to the commencement of this research in 2006, Muslim schools received ample attention in popular media, and increasingly so in academic publications. Unfortunately, the empirical basis of most reports was many a time meager, and often absent. Three assumptions about Muslim schools prevailed: that Muslim schools are madrasas, that Muslim schools teach fundamentalist ideologies which may undermine social cohesion, and that Muslim schools are selected because parents have no other options.

In this study, I test these assumptions in the context of urban India. Next, I shift the discussion away from the limited scope of inquiry that these assumptions represent: the scope of securitization and Muslim schools as religious schools alone. Instead, I propose to analyze the schools through the lenses of privatization and segregation as well, and raise the following questions. What are Muslim schools in Mumbai really like? Who selects them? Why is the number of Muslim schools in Mumbai growing?

In order to answer these questions, between 2008 and 2010 I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai. Eight schools were selected as case study schools. At the school level, data was collected via formal and informal semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals, through classroom and school observations, and from documents published by the schools. Further, 76 parents of Muslim schools were interviewed. Original data thus obtained was supplemented with visits to other Muslim and non-Muslim schools, and with interviews with other actors active in the field of education, such as government officials of the municipal corporation.

This study is an exploratory study employing a heuristic approach. It seeks to draw out ideas about what factors are related to each other in order to develop an exploratory analytical framework. This framework subsequently needs to be tested in a more quantitative manner.

From the data, it emerged that Muslim schools in Mumbai are a highly diverse group of schools. Contrary to popular belief, I observed that certainly not all Muslim schools are madrasas, definitely not all Muslim schools promote fundamentalist ideologies, and parents who select these schools do have other options available to them.

The fieldwork data further confirmed that Muslim schools in Mumbai share three characteristics: in addition to being religious (or faith-based) schools, they are private schools and segregated schools. Doing justice to the heterogeneity of Muslim schools in Mumbai, and based on ten indicators related to markers of religiosity, segregation and privatization, I developed a typology of Muslim schools. This typology is meant to be exhaustive, not in terms of school options available to Muslim parents in India, but in the sense that it covers all school types Muslim parents can opt for should they desire a religiously or culturally Muslim school. The typology lays a solid foundation for

a more integrated analytical framework for Muslim schools in Mumbai, and, indeed, possibly faith-based schools more generally.

Uncovering why Muslim schools exist and grow in number, fourteen factors were identified. These factors create either an incentive or a possibility to start or select a Muslim school. Although different types of Muslim schools fulfill different needs, and not all fourteen factors are equally important for each school type, taken together they explain the existence and growth of Muslim schools in Mumbai. It was found that most of these factors are related to wider trends of desecularization, privatization, and segregation of society.

Moral insecurities—voiced as fears of Westernization, Christianization, or Hinduization, and growing up with the “wrong” Islam and/or a lack of Islam—provide powerful incentives for parents to select (religious and segregated) Muslim schools in Mumbai, and for educators to found them. The same applies to political insecurities. Parents and educators are affected by macro-historical events (such as Partition, riots and the rise of Hindutva) which cut deep wounds at the micro level, influencing perceptions and realities. Parents and educators at Muslims schools seek community-based segregated schools for their children, where they can learn, free from being and/or feeling discriminated against.

In addition to feelings of insecurity, the demand for English education, whether or not in combination with Urdu, provides an incentive to choose (private) Muslim schools, as does the desire for having certain religion-based habits and practices at school (such as related to attire, and curriculum and gender segregation). Simultaneously, the existing legal and policy frameworks (historical and in the context of privatization) provide possibilities for (private, religious and segregated) Muslim schools to grow.

Various non-religion-based incentives are at play in the growth of Muslim schools in urban India. Nevertheless, an important finding of this research is that parents actively and voluntarily choose Muslim schools for their children’s education, being pulled to it by religious factors. Parents do not select schools despite the schools’ religious character, they choose the schools because of it. Doing justice to the reality of Muslim schools therefore entails acknowledging that the growth of Muslim schools is the result of diverse factors, and not the consequence of either— or primarily— secular or religious motives of the actors involved, nor merely of possibilities available. Different types of Muslim schools fulfill different needs for different types of parents (who cover a wide spectrum in terms of social class, ideology, and aspirations).

The growth of the number of Muslim schools, the accompanying discourse found at schools and among parents, the *what* of the schools and the *why* of it are the signs and symptoms of much wider trends of desecularization, privatization and segregation in contemporary India. Viewing the growth of Muslim and other religious schools first and foremost as a result of societal trends, rather than as the seedbed of new ones, will affect our approach to them. Should having Muslim schools—as well as other religious, private and segregated schools—be deemed undesirable, then it is futile to

address the issue by limiting the possibilities alone. It is the incentives felt, the moral and political insecurities and the needs of those who set up and select the schools, that require to be acknowledged and addressed.