

Education, Poverty and Gender: Schooling Muslim Girls in India

Latika Gupta,

New Delhi: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2015 (South Asia edition)

Mohammad Ilyas

National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) New Delhi

This book is a theoretically grounded ethnography of a Muslim girls' school in Daryaganj, Old Delhi. Drawing on the literature from different fields of study's Author gives the reader a visual account of the daily life of the adolescent students in grades 11 and 12—the 11th grade students being her object of study, and the 12th grade students to whom she taught history—of a private government-aided girls' school she calls the Muslim Girls' School (MGS). Gupta's signal contribution to the field in this book, in my view, is her recognition of the importance of studying the students' home environment in addition to the academic one in order to fully understand the students' perspective on the world. As a result, she is able to show the continuities between home and school in the lives of the students. In *Education, Poverty, and Gender: Schooling Muslim Girls in India*, Latika Gupta offers an informative analysis of economically challenged young Muslim women in northern India, focused on “becoming a woman and becoming religious” at school, at home, and in the “interstitial spaces” of community. Drawing on both sociology and psychology, the monograph considers the impact of schooling on identity formation in Old Delhi. The book is surprising in its ambition, reaching across diverse literature and using multiple research methods. The book contains 6 chapters that give the reader a richly detailed and insightful understanding of the lives of young women in a deeply religious community.

In chapter 1, the introductory part of the book, Author presents the central problem, i.e. “The study of a minority school for Muslim girls offers an opportunity to examine the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors involved in the shaping of religious and gendered identities” The chapter briefly describes the community where the research took place. The author then provides a thorough review of relevant literature on gender, religion, and secularism, featuring primary research produced by Indian scholars. Followed by chapter 2, “Identity, Self, and Religion”, which introduces the theoretical framework for the main concept of identity.

"Ethos as a Gendering Device," is the central chapter of the book in more ways than one, as it is preceded by a review of the theoretical literature and followed by interesting analytical insights into the data in later chapters of the book. As Gupta describes it, the school consists of 650 students and is located in a relatively prosperous part of Daryaganj, while most of the students live in a poorer part behind the Jamia Masjid. The distance they travel to and from the school by foot, in groups, every day acquires great psychological importance for both them and their parents. The parents see the journey as one fraught with danger, exposing the girls not only to heavy traffic but also to the corrupting influences of the outside world. In a sense, it epitomizes for them the potential dangers of the very fact that their daughters are studying beyond the 8th grade, the traditional limit of a lower-class Muslim girl's education, after which she would be pulled out of school to prepare for her future life of matrimony and domesticity. Parents find themselves defending the choice to continue their daughters' education beyond 8th grade.

Further in "Articulated Discourses," Gupta explores issues of identity by analyzing twenty-five students' Urdu-language essays on topics of her choices. Gupta's analysis of the use of "stock phrases" in the essays is particularly interesting. Thus, students' use of phrases such as "I love my parents," "I want to study," or "I am a good girl" reveals the conflicts they negotiate on a daily basis. When they express the love they feel toward their parents, Gupta writes, we see two distinct things going on: first, their sense of indebtedness toward their parents for the latter's ability to provide for them and their siblings despite a severe shortage of material resources, and second, the guilt they feel for being "disobedient" toward family elders by wanting to continue their studies, thereby putting their parents—and particularly their mothers, their primary allies—in a difficult position vis-a-vis the extended family network. Likewise, the phrase "I am a good girl" expresses the students' desire to reassure their parents that they do not intend to "take any liberty which fell into the category of prohibited interaction" with unrelated men. Their further studies impose a double burden on their parents, who incur extra expenses to educate their youngest daughter and consequently have less money on hand to pay for the marriage of their older daughters.

For the school going girls also represents a precious source of exposure to the external world and a little period of freedom from family responsibilities which they would otherwise not have. Muslim girls have fewer opportunities for socialization outside the home. Gupta writes because unlike Hindu girls they do not leave home for worship and have limited exposure to markets, parks, and even the neighborhoods in which they live. They do not have access to television, being at school allows the girls to talk to one another about such things. Latika Gupta's skillful weaves together the different constituents of identity, based on Western and Indian scholarship on the themes of gender, women and Islam, self, and culture through what Gupta refers to the "sociopolitical ethos." She emphasizes the inculcation of certain normative behavior specific to "Indian society" as well as to Muslim women and stands by her argument with relevant knowledge which suggests that young women internalize norms and learn how to live out their lives in accordance with the expectations. This apparently happens in an ideal manner without any explicit forms of resistance or agency exercised by either the girls at school or by other women in their families and community. Chapter 5, explores four aspects of identity: a girl as an adolescent, as proto-citizen, as a gendered being, and as a student. Gupta presents profiles of the young women that are based on their responses to questions about relationships, movement, dress, aspirations, exposure to media, awareness of political events, information about bodily processes, and beliefs about life and death.

If school is a potent source for the broadening of students' horizons, Gupta concludes, however, that for a number of reasons the school fails to live up to its promise of promoting citizenship and political participation in its students as envisaged by the constitution of India and required by the democratic process. First, she finds that the school exemplifies what she calls "disengaged pedagogy" that is, the curriculum is meaningless which fails to connect with the lives of the students. Second, the teachers who, like the parents, are important role models in the lives of the students—share the worldview and ethos of the students and their parents, and thus offer no conceptual break between home and school. The third significant explanation Gupta offers is that the ideal of a "good girl" upheld by students, teachers, and parents alike draws on religious ethics and role models, which play a major role in the girls' identity.

The data contained in Chapters 3 and 4 no doubt enrich our understanding of how Muslim girls, encouraged by their mothers and teachers, perceive and enact their embodied and behavioral dispositions. Rather than seeking out differences between Hindu and Muslim girls in this context, an analysis of the constitution of gender identity across religious identities would enrich our understanding of the role of factors other than religion in

the constitution of identity. Drawing out these differences does not tell us very much about either the young women concerned or about the religious discourses, both of which advocate certain kinds of behavior as more appropriate and valid over others.

Seeking a Change comes out very clearly in the chapter “Articulated Discourse,” where Gupta examines some writings by the young MGS girls on a theme she sets for them. Gupta’s respondents aspire to become teachers and to study further, as much as they can, or are allowed to. Gupta suggests that these aspirations are linked to the perception of a woman’s primary role as that of a caregiver and that studying further is only a trick to delay marriage in which they know they will be trapped. Both aspirations, of becoming a teacher and of studying further, whatever motivations they may be based on, are articulations by young MGS girls of their desires for advancement. The concluding chapter first summarizes the school’s influence on religious and gendered identity formation, or “becoming a religiogendered being”. It then concludes with a full discussion of the study’s implications for policy reform and teacher preparation. The book will particularly appeal to those in our field who are interested in religion and education, gender and education, and the influence of schooling on identity formation. Social change takes time, and it often begins with the kinds of small steps described clearly in this book.

