

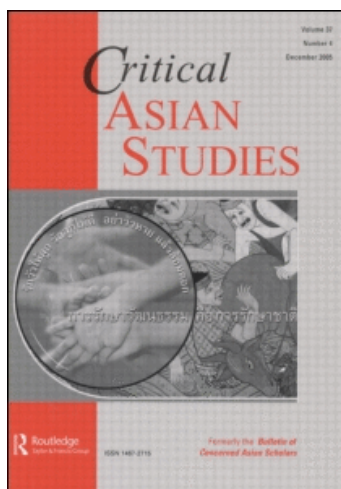
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THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND THE PEDAGOGY FOR HOPE

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FIELD REPORT

THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND THE PEDAGOGY FOR HOPE

Some Perspectives on Talimi Haq School

V. Ramaswamy, Lorena Gibson, Sita Venkateswar

ABSTRACT: This article is constructed as three narratives that are situated within the distinct and separate spatio-temporal contexts of social activism and research of the three contributors. Each contributor's role and position within this context has inflected his/her discursive approach, ranging from a polemical stance to one of empiricism and reflexivity. The article thus presents multiple modes of writing, analysis, and engagement, drawing on participant-observation to oral history documentation, activist experience, and field survey. The trajectory of each contribution is linked and we aim to provide a cohesive account in three voices, offering imbricated views of a pedagogical context in an extremely poor, Muslim slum in Howrah, West Bengal, India. This article-cum-photo essay is also an illustration of how collaborative writing — inclusive of activist experience and academic research — can address the issues of poverty and hope as it examines the role of education in such a context.

“I want to read and write so I can change the world.” — Paulo Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (1974)

“While I certainly cannot ignore hopelessness as a concrete entity, nor turn a blind eye to the historical, economic and social reasons that explain that hopelessness — I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream. Hope is an ontolog-

ical need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and become a distortion of that ontological need.” — Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994)

Introduction

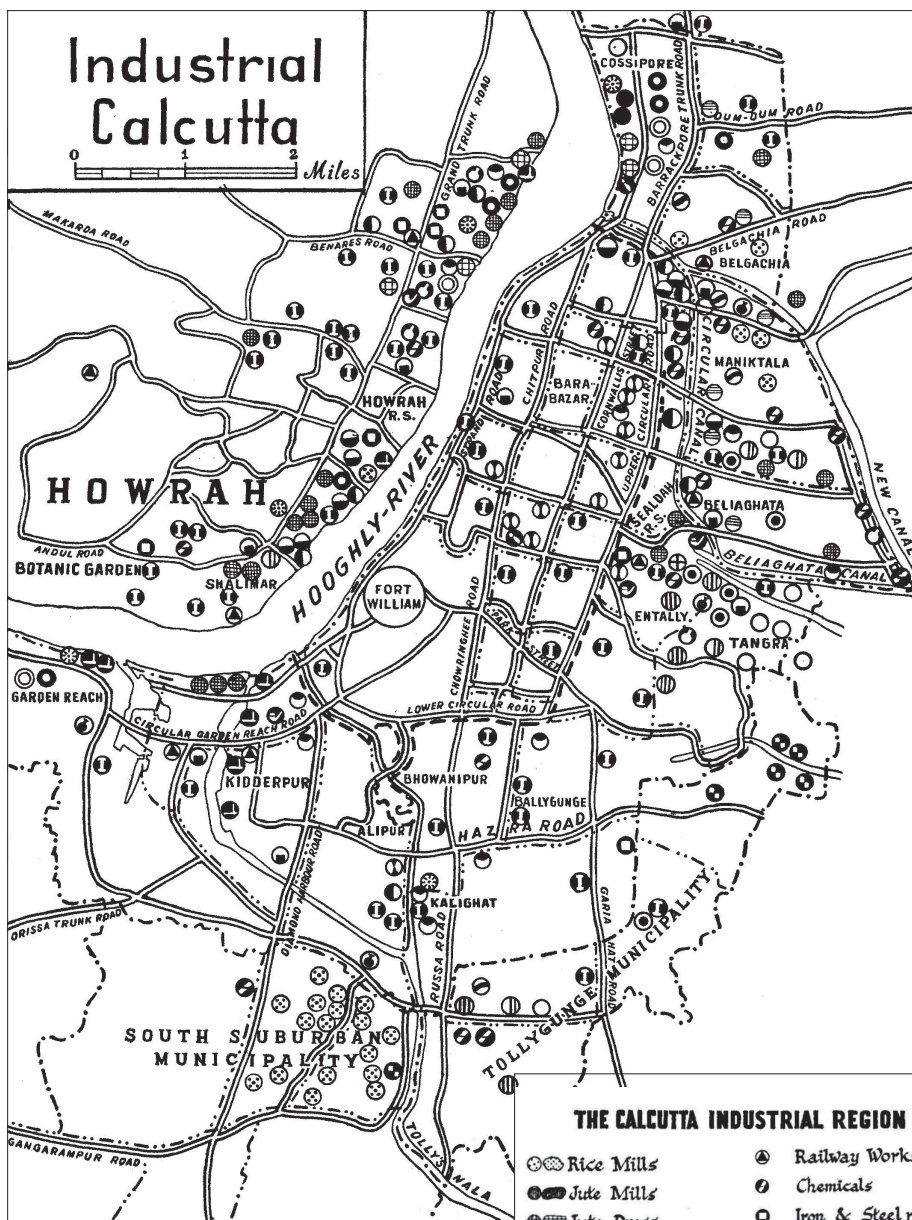
This article examines the educational initiatives of Talimi Haq School¹ in a slum area outside Kolkata (West Bengal) that is inhabited predominantly by Urdu-speaking Muslims. Named Priya Manna Basti² (PM Basti, hereafter), the settlement is located in Howrah on the western bank of the river Hooghly. The century-old basti is home to an estimated 50,000. Howrah Jute Mills, one of the few remaining jute mills, is the main employer in the area.

The Howrah Pilot Project (HPP) established Talimi Haq School as a school for nonformal learning in 1998.³ The HPP is a small, grassroots organization that runs several community development initiatives in PM Basti, including a *masala* (spice)-making enterprise, a women’s saving scheme, access to family planning services, and cataract surgery, but running Talimi Haq School is its central activity. The school caters to children from poor households who cannot afford to send their children to formal schools and to working children who do not attend school. Talimi Haq School may be seen as a living laboratory of educational intervention in a poor/low-income, marginalised, Muslim, urban slum community. It provides a pedagogical context that offers an opportunity to reflect on the vexed nexus of poverty, disenfranchisement, and education as it relates to Muslims in West Bengal.

Three individuals collaborated in the production of this article: V. Ramaswamy, Lorena Gibson, and Sita Venkateswar.

Ramaswamy is a social activist and urban planner turned business executive, with a long history of involvement in slum renewal projects in Kolkata. Inspired by the lives and work of Paulo Freire and Sylvia Ashton-Warner, he is also the key architect of the Howrah Pilot Project from which Talimi Haq School was born. Ramaswamy’s extensive writing over the years on the Howrah Pilot Project and its interventions, as well as on the political context of West Bengal, provides the

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1. “Talimi Haq” means “right to education” in Urdu.
 2. “Basti” means “settlement” in Bengali and Hindi. It is a word that is currently used to refer to slums where the poorest inhabitants of the city reside.
 3. Ramaswamy established the HPP in August 1997 following experiences he had had working on an environmental management project. From 1995 to 1997, Ramaswamy worked as the social development coordinator of the Calcutta Environmental Management Strategy and Action Plan (CEMSAP), a community-based environmental improvement project run by the West Bengal Department of Environment (with support from Britain’s Department for International Development). In consultation with community members in Howrah, Ramaswamy developed a scheme to improve the serious sanitation conditions by providing toilets and eliminating service latrines in slums. Unfortunately, despite widespread community support, the service latrine elimination programme did not succeed. Frustrated by the lack of progress through official channels, Ramaswamy started the HPP as an independent follow-up project to CEMSAP. The HPP’s goal is to renew the community, slum, and city by beginning from the poorest and most socially and environmentally degraded slum localities. “Environmental improvement and poverty reduction in metropolitan Calcutta can succeed only by building capable leadership for community development at the grassroots,” he said. “And this is what Howrah Pilot Project has been doing.”



Map of the multiple industries that flourished in Kolkata and Howrah in the late forties until the industrial slump in the sixties. From *Bengal in Maps*, by S.P. Chatterjee. Bombay: Orient Longmans Limited, 1949. 92–93.

THE CALCUTTA INDUSTRIAL REGION

☉ Rice Mills	⊙ Railway Workshop
☉ Jute Mills	⊙ Chemicals
☉ Jute Press	⊙ Iron & Steel rolling
⊙ Cotton	⊙ Paper Mills
⊙ "Ginning&Baling"	⊙ Glass
⊙ Flour Mills	⊙ Rubber
⊙ Tobacco	⊙ Matches
⊙ Soap	⊙ Oil Mills
⊙ Paint	⊙ Hosiery
⊙ Pottery&Cement	⊙ Silk
⊙ Brick-fields	⊙ Saw Mills
⊙ Printing	⊙ Leather & Shoe
⊙ Docks	⊙ Tanneries
⊙ Shell Factory	⊙ General Engineering
	⊙ Power Generating



A view of Priya Manna Basti taken from the window of Talimi Haq School. (Sita Venkateswar)

backdrop against which the more recent research projects of the other contributors are situated.

Lorena Gibson recounts her involvement in teaching the children who attend Talimi Haq School. Her engagement with this context is a part of her doctoral research among some of the women from that basti.

Finally, Sita Venkateswar draws on some preliminary data from a survey that she initiated among the children of Talimi Haq School to suggest a basis for the pedagogy of hope that resists the bleak surroundings amidst which it exists.

The narrative that unfolds is constructed in three distinctly separate sections to suggest the changing voices of the authors. The first is the background, which Ramaswamy outlines. This provides a sense of history regarding the workers' slum under study and about the community's educational initiatives. This is followed by a description of the pedagogical process used in Talimi Haq School. Foregrounded here are the classroom and the children, their eagerness to learn, their creative and perceptive minds and their alertness to the fraught ground of class relations. Finally, the last section examines the larger question of hope amidst despair, hope manifest as effort, sensitivity, and in the aspirations of the school's pupils.

□

BACKGROUND

V. Ramaswamy

PM Basti, Howrah, is a century-old jute workers' slum spread over 12.5 acres. Its current inhabitants — numbering about 50,000 — come mainly from laboring, Urdu-speaking, Muslim households. While historically the metropolis has been home to large numbers of single, male, migrant laborers from the eastern hinterland seeking employment at the jute factories, the basti has a long-settled community that includes families spanning over three generations. The basti accommodated migrant workers as well as others with their households, extended families, and kin networks.

The life of the poorest households revolves around daily survival in the margins of society. It is estimated that about 10 percent of the slum households are in the poorest category. Few in this category avail themselves of primary education and children begin working from as early as the age of five, either in the home or outside. Girls are married by the time they are sixteen, and they raise their own children in the same manner. Illiteracy is almost universal in this poorest class. Attitudes among the uneducated regarding female education and women's activities outside the home are conservative. Typically, the bread-winning male earns his daily wage of between one hundred rupees and one hundred and fifty rupees, performing manual labor, petty vending, rickshaw pulling, and the like. Family sizes are large, with at least five children being the norm and in some cases more than ten. Shelter consists of a single (rented) room of about 100 square feet. The physical environment is degraded, with extreme overcrowding, inadequate drinking water, and very poor sanitation, drainage, and waste disposal. Health conditions are poor, with occasional infant and maternal mortality and perpetual morbidity. Lacking any vocational skills the livelihood options for youth, and especially girls, are extremely limited. A range of piece-work production activities take place, with very low remuneration. Such bastis prompt reflection on the effects of chronic poverty, on intergenerational transmission of poverty, and on poverty and cognitive development in children — all rooted in the complex of factors found in basti environments like PM Basti, in Howrah.

Howrah, a million-plus city, lies in the Kolkata Metropolitan Area, whose population in 2001 was just over 13 million.⁴ The city of Kolkata, which is separated from Howrah by the river Hooghly, is the largest city in the metropolitan area, with a population in 2001 of about 4.5 million. Kolkata and Howrah are located in the Indian state of West Bengal, which has been ruled since 1977 by the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). From the government's *2001 Census*, which included a study of slums in Kolkata city, we are able

4. Census of India 2001.

to extrapolate and infer some idea about the situation of slum dwellers in Howrah. Howrah has been a historically neglected city in comparison to Kolkata and the situation is likely to be worse than what the census information reveals regarding Kolkata city. According to the slum study, 67 percent of the slum population of the city was found to be literate, with 71 percent of males and 62 percent of females in that category. But for the city of Kolkata as a whole the literacy rate was 82 percent (85 percent of males and 78 percent of females). One must add here that all such figures are aggregates and as such do not convey the true nature of existing reality, which requires disaggregated data. As a 2006 report by the Association of Indian Minorities (AIM) observes, the state of West Bengal is one of those that will not be able to achieve the Millennium Development Goals⁵ (MDGs) or even the goal of universal primary education by the year 2015. Citing a United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) press release, the AIM report draws attention to the first *West Bengal Human Development Report*, which states that “never enrolled children tend to be more concentrated among the lower income groups and the Scheduled Tribe and Minority populations.”⁶

The AIM report states that approximately 3 million school-age children in West Bengal are not enrolled in government-supported public schools. A sizeable number of these children belong to the Muslim minority. Only about 3 percent of Muslim, school age children, especially those belonging to the most socioeconomically vulnerable section, go to madrasahs.⁷ A recent insightful study by Zakir Husain⁸ on education in Muslim slums in Kolkata, indicates that the Muslim community considers education to be very important for both girls and boys. Husain points out, however, that given the long-standing biases that poor Muslims in India continue to endure, the long-term material benefits of investing in secondary and tertiary education remains unclear to this population. Hence, boys tend to drop out after primary school. The same tendency has also been observed while working in PM Basti. Girls’ schooling is as widespread, but here the insufficiency of available school seats works against them. The current minimum age of marriage of Muslim girls is fourteen years. Many Muslim girls are married off by the age of sixteen and this often results in their withdrawal from schooling. It should be noted that the poorest, as in PM Basti (10 percent of the slum), remain outside the purview of the overstretched education systems.

Poor and low-income families in PM Basti and in slums across Kolkata and Howrah who aspire to educate their children and girls now encounter fewer biases in this regard, but the state of the government and government-supported

5. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals to be achieved by 2015 that respond to the world’s main development challenges. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the “UN Millennium Summit” in September 2000. (See www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml [accessed 10 February 2010]).

6. The Report of the Association of Indian Minorities 2006, 6.

7. Madrasah’s are community-run schools for Islamic education. Poor children, whose parents are unable to send them to school, go to the madrasahs instead, to get at least some rudimentary education. At these institutions Urdu is the medium of education and follows an Islamic curriculum.

8. Zakir Hussain 2005.



The new Hooghly bridge named Vidyasagar setu connects / separates Kolkata from the denizens of the urban squalor of blighted Howrah. Kolkata was once a thriving port and Howrah a booming center of jute manufacture. The river is a silent witness to the industrial slump that has marked the state of West Bengal over the past four decades. (Sita Venkateswar)

schools at the primary level is abysmal. In the Howrah Upper Primary School in PM Basti, for example, as many as 150 children are packed into one poorly ventilated, dimly lit room, sitting on each others' laps. As M.K.A. Siddiqui's study shows, this is not at all a-typical.⁹

The perception among poor and low-income inhabitants of slum localities like PM Basti is that if and when they finish their secondary education, the economy and society will have no jobs to offer them except as manual laborers. Hence boys drop out of school and begin working because early entry into the labor market is perceived to be a more strategic livelihood option. Girls, on the other hand, often complete or continue part-way through their secondary schooling before getting married during their mid-teen years. Besides concerns about the health of these girls as young mothers with children, the incidence of desertion of such young, married girls is also cause for worry. Left alone to fend for themselves and their infants, and lacking an adequate education or marketable skills, such girls face a difficult life. Thus adolescent girls form a very vulnerable category and the cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement is perpetuated. At the age of thirteen they have their whole lives ahead of them; by the age of nineteen the lives of some of them are completely behind them.

PM Basti has a valuable story to narrate. A large community of migrant, laboring people, who were both historically disenfranchised and unlettered, arrived

9. Siddiqui 2005.

in search of livelihood to settle in Howrah. They lived for decades in a degraded and unhealthy environment. They transformed into a community of people through long years of coexistence under adversity. In the 1930s, community leaders established a school that ran for about a decade. Notwithstanding the disruption of communal riots and partition during the forties, during the 1950s this community witnessed a profound new beginning, in the self-help efforts toward formal education of a historically deprived and exploited section of the population. They generated community leaders comprised of people who, having obtained some education themselves, and having reached a good station in life, saw education as a key means to social advancement of the wider community. Community leaders set up local schools¹⁰ that in turn generated large numbers of educated men, several of whom went on to acquire respectable and remunerative jobs. Realizing the importance of schooling and education for women, community leaders in PM Basti set up a separate girls' section of the Howrah High School to educate young women. Graduates from these schools would in turn send their own girls to school and university.

The community in PM Basti is a microcosm of the situation of north Indian Muslims. Their self-help efforts flourished notwithstanding the cloud of suspicion and discrimination looming over Indian Muslims in post-independence India. But the positive story of PM Basti has been reversed, first by the deindustrialization in West Bengal that began by the late sixties and then by the criminalized political culture that has come to be established over the last two decades. Illegal building construction, theft and sale of electricity, and extortion are among the major politically sponsored criminal activities in the area.¹¹ More than sixty years after independence, even though school-going has become the rule in PM Basti and thousands upon thousands of boys and girls have successfully defied all the challenges arising in trying to obtain education, the pathetic state of the education system plays a cruel joke on Urdu-medium students by taking them up the path to nowhere.¹²

Today, it is very difficult to discern any positive currents. One has to painstakingly uncover the underlying story to realize just how significant the local sensibility toward education once was, and how important it is to revive it. The sense

10. Based on oral history documentation collected by Ramaswamy during 1997–98, this account traces the history of the community's efforts to provide education for the community. It provides valuable insight into the changing role of the Howrah Jute Mills in supporting these endeavors by the workers of the mills and into the origins of the Howrah Upper Primary School in the Muslim Free School started by leading members of the community.

11. Banerjee 2006.

12. The reality of the apartheid-like educational system in Kolkata and Howrah is that the Urdu-medium government schools play a cruel fraud on the children attending such schools. In view of the rapid pace of economic change within India, the stagnant curriculum and the moribund pedagogy within these schools segregates and excludes the children who have completed such schooling from the opportunities or access to the possibilities for a better life within the globalizing economy. In this context, almost two decades after its publication, Myron Weiner's (1991) scathing critique of India's failure to enforce compulsory primary education, and the two-tiered system in place that perpetuates the discriminatory structures of social hierarchy within India continues to remain valid. More recently, Gayatri Spivak's (2008) essay also uses the phrase "class apartheid" to refer to the social iniquities perpetuated through the existing educational structure within the Global South.



New Central Jute Mills jute factory, outside Kolkata. PM Basti, Howrah, a century-old jute workers' slum spread over 12.5 acres, has been home to large numbers of single, male, migrant laborers from the eastern hinterland seeking employment at the jute factories. (Workers hang up their sweat-soaked shirts to dry.) (V.K. Ramachandran, 2006)

of initiative, aspiration, and spirit that led activists and trade unionists in the community to engage in self-help projects such as the setting up of schools and in the process to strengthen the local Communist Party has been utterly uprooted. The community has been reduced to utter dependence¹³ for even the most basic things on the crumbs that the political party may throw their way, and they have become criminalized in the process. The sons of once-respected community-based Party leaders, whose support was crucial to building and maintaining the Muslim electoral power base of the CPI(M) government in West Bengal, are today Party-affiliated crooks and fixers among whom the elderly from earlier generations are a sad anachronism, and objects of ridicule.¹⁴ This transformation is what the CPI(M)¹⁵ has presided over in its three decades of power within the state government.

□

13. Such dependence on a political party in this context means, for example, that the slum dwellers have to submit to the criminal activities of the Party's grassroots cadres: electricity connections must be purchased from a party-supported person, who steals electricity through an illegal connection and then resells it to the community at large.
14. A good example of this is the former councilor of the Howrah Municipal Corporation, elected from the ward under which PM Basti falls. The ex-councillor was elected here in 2008.
15. The CPI(M) had been the political party in power in West Bengal, winning elections over the course of thirty years. It now faces major setbacks following village council elections in 2008 and the general elections of 2009.

A PEDAGOGY IN PROCESS: TEACHING AT TALIMI HAQ SCHOOL

Lorena Gibson

At 3:00 P.M. each day the voices of eighty children raised in prayer fill a small room on the first floor of an apartment block, signaling the start of the Talimi Haq school day. These children like going to school: they start arriving well before 3:00 to greet their teachers affectionately, meet friends, and play. Talimi Haq School aims to stimulate the children, instill a love of learning, and give them a basic education to prepare them for formal school. "We do not give them any degree or certificate, but we try to make them into good human beings," said Amina, head teacher and coordinator of the Howrah Pilot Project (HPP).

After prayers the school's five trained volunteer teachers assemble the children into four groups based on their level of schooling. Classes run in two shifts, with primary school classes taught at 3:00 and middle school classes starting at 4.30. Each teacher sets up a blackboard at either end of the two rooms that double as HPP offices and students sit in their groups facing their teacher. There are no desks or chairs. Students sit on straw mats on a concrete floor. After a while some of them slowly rock back and forth to ease the pressure of sitting on a cold, hard surface. The rooms are sparsely furnished: a computer sits on a desk in one room alongside a filing cabinet, a small bookshelf, an oven used to dry *masalas*, and some treadle sewing machines; the other room contains a wooden bench, some blackboards, a sink and separate small washroom/toilet, and shelves stacked with books, teaching materials, and resources for the other HPP initiatives. The open, barred windows overlooking neighbouring houses regularly let in smoke from coal cooking fires, filling the room. The HPP is not a wealthy or well-funded organization. The school provides old, worn slates for children to work on. Some of the older students might have pencils and paper. Two classes are taught simultaneously in each room with one teacher, usually Amina, monitoring the situation and assisting where required. Teaching four groups of children at one time means noise levels can become uncomfortable, especially when a group of young Class 2 students are learning to sing nursery rhymes or the English alphabet, but overall the students appear disciplined and focused on the work at hand.

There is no formal syllabus or curriculum; lessons are planned by the volunteer teachers to meet key indicators, such as a level of proficiency in Hindi or mathematics that will enable students to enroll in formal school. All five teachers grew up in or near PM Basti — Amina's family lives two doors away from the school — and are paid a modest stipend for their work. They teach classes in



Prayer time at Talimi Haq School. (Binod Shaw)

English, Urdu, Hindi, maths, history, geography, Islamic religion and moral education, nature and environmental sciences, social awareness, hygiene and cleanliness, drawing and painting, crafts, singing, drama, computer and internet literacy, and physical culture. Children pay a nominal fee to attend the school and there are no costs associated with books or school uniforms. In May 2007 there were 125 girls and boys ranging in age from four to fifteen enrolled at the school, and the newly added morning Montessori class for two to three year olds attracted twenty-five more students. Amina and Binod (Amina's second-in-command) believe that young children are most in need of a positive educational experience. As Amina explained, "a child's main educational background is built here and if this primary education is weak, he or she won't study later or have a future."

In January and February 2007 I designed and taught an introductory social anthropology course at Talimi Haq School in collaboration with Amina and Binod, who welcomed my proposal enthusiastically. The aim of the course was to introduce eight selected older students to social anthropology. In keeping with the school's philosophy of learning by doing we decided to have them complete two practical assignments based on research techniques the students had seen me use: interviews and a photo essay.

I thought the photo essay would be a fun learning activity for the students, who regularly have their photos taken by their teachers and visitors to the school. The walls of the classrooms are covered with photo displays made by teachers showcasing various school activities and performances, and I envis-

Photographs by Shahana and Sabina



“People lock money and now a lock has been made for water too.” — Sabina.



“Here, people fight over water. First they will stand in line with a bucket to fill with water. Once the water comes, then everyone starts filling their buckets fast.” — Shahana.



“Water is used for soaking clothes, while cooking, for washing dishes, to wash rice and for drinking as well.” — Shahana



“People need water and the supply of water has been cut off, [so] that is why they sleep here.... We don’t get much water here. Somebody comes on behalf of the government and supplies water, which a person has to pay money for.” — Shahana

aged the students adding their own displays to the walls. Also, Amina and Binod had participated in a photo-blog project coordinated by Munich-based artist Baird Connell in 2006 so they were familiar with this approach. I donated four automatic cameras to the school. Working in pairs, the students chose a symbol or ritual and created a photo essay to tell a story about that symbol or ritual.

I was impressed with the students' displays. Mini (13) and Akbar (15) chose to document the first day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar), and their essay chronologically depicted the day's events. Mini and Akbar were a little hesitant about working together at first, as it is unusual for Muslim girls to spend time with unrelated boys in PM Basti, but people who questioned them accepted that they were working on a project for Talimi Haq School and they had no problems. Taslim (13) and Ezaz (13) chose cricket — their favorite pastime — and their essay portrayed the variety of spaces they use to play cricket within the basti, from narrow lanes crowded with goats and people to an open dirt area next to the Hooghly river. Sohail (13) and Sabir (13) chose Talimi Haq School and their photos captured the range of activities that students participate in, including prayers and a school outing to Science City. I was most struck by the photo essay compiled by ten-year-old girls Shahana and Sabina. They chose *pani* (water) and their display revealed all the ways in which water is used in the basti. For me, these images sharply brought home the immediate daily concerns and living conditions of the people, particularly for women (the subject of many of their photos), of PM Basti. Some of their photos are reproduced in this essay.

Like Mini, Shahana and Sabina were also concerned about whether they would be able to carry out the assignment. While they received a few negative comments about girls "roaming around," their association with Talimi Haq School, well known within the basti, seemed to ease the way for them to move freely and take photos. All three girls mentioned the way their confidence grew throughout the assignment. "When I went out with the camera to take a picture, lots of people said things like 'take my picture!' But I said 'No' to them, and while taking a few pictures, my hands were shaking," said Mini. "But then, I remembered what Lorena *baji* had told me about the camera and when I started using it, my hands stopped shaking." Shahana also enjoyed learning to use a camera. "Till today, we never had the chance to use a camera to take a picture," she said. "In the process of taking a picture, we got to learn a lot. We met many different people in this process. Some people said a lot of nice things and many people said a lot of bad things like, 'Girls today are roaming around and taking pictures, in our time we never had no camera.'"

I visited Talimi Haq School every year between 2004 and 2007. Because I am not the only anthropologist the school children have ever met, I thought it would be good for them to have a greater understanding of what social anthropology is, what kinds of things anthropologists are interested in, and how we conduct research. I also wanted the students to feel able and entitled to ask me questions about my research and thought that a teacher-student relationship might encourage them to do so. Finally, I wanted to build on my previous roles as participant-observer, teacher's aide, and very poor cricket player, and was ex-

cited about sharing my passion for anthropology with students I consider to be extremely intelligent and eager to learn.

None of this seemed sufficient, however, when Mini came up to me shortly before the first class and asked in her ever-improving English: “Lorena ma’am, why you want to teach us?” I gave her my reasons, explaining that I thought they were very bright students who might be interested in learning about what I do. Mini thought about this for a minute, then said, “Yes, but why you want to teach *us*?” Her question gave me pause, and I don’t recall my exact response. To me, Mini’s question reflected her keen perception of the class divisions that pervade Indian society and shape her life. On more than one occasion I was told by people I met in Kolkata city that Howrah was not a place where “nice people” go. “Why do you want to work there?” asked Mr. Bannerjee, a man I became acquainted with during my stay at a guest house in Ballygunge, upon learning about my research interests. His comment that “They will never get out of poverty” encapsulates a perception about the limited social opportunities available to Muslims living in urban poverty that I believe is shared by many of Kolkata’s residents.

I thought about Mini’s question a lot and in our final class I had the students give a short talk about what they thought of my anthropology course. Sohail said he enjoyed it because although a lot of foreigners had visited their school, I was the first foreigner to teach them and to give them a project where they could choose their own topic and create a photo essay based on it. The other students expressed similar sentiments. In subsequent conversations I came to understand that my decision to engage with them as their teacher showed them, and their families, that a foreigner with high social and cultural capital from a wealthy country thought that they were worth teaching, and that Talimi Haq School was worth writing about in a doctoral dissertation. This is no small thing in Priya Manna Basti.

My efforts complemented the work of Talimi Haq School’s teachers, who show these children that they are valued, worthy, and loved on a daily basis. As well as educating their students, the teachers also work to raise the social value of education in this predominantly illiterate basti. One of the ways they do this is by staging school dramas for the local community that tap into concerns parents have about providing for their children. “Here there are lots of problems in getting water,” Binod explained. “Food is a problem too, but even when you can’t do anything about food, water is still a must.” Wanting to base a drama on everyday situations and “how people think,” Amina and Binod created a performance in 2006 that contained a scene at a water pump. I have recreated Amina’s description of the play as stage directions.

SCENE: The early morning line at a water pump.

(SULTANA has herded her seven children along to stand in line for water with her. Her children don’t go to school; instead they get into mischief and roam the streets from dawn until dusk, playing in water, dirt, and dust. She is struggling to keep them still and carries her six-month-old baby on her hip. RANI, who sends all of her own children to school, joins

the line alone. But the line is long and the water supply is cut before they can fill their buckets.)

RANI: (To SULTANA, looking at all of the children fidgeting in line.) You come along with all your kids?

SULTANA: (Turns to look at RANI and sighs.) What else can I do? I need to collect water.

RANI: Why don't you send your children to school? Send them to school!

SULTANA: (Tells her boys to stop kicking dust around.) I am not able to make proper arrangements for food. How will I send them to school? (Moves her baby from one hip to the other.) Anyway, what's the point of studying?

RANI: If you send your children to school, regardless of whether or not the children are being taught, they will be given food every day. If your child is a girl, she will be given clothes, rice, and along with that, textbooks. And it's free. So why don't you send your children there? (Pauses to see whether she has SULTANA'S attention.) I send all my children to school. One of my boys is only three years old, but I told the school he is five years old and got him admission. The rice that is given there, I keep enough for all of us to eat and I sell the rest. This way, I get some money to take care of the other household expenses.

Transforming attitudes and lives is a slow process that is not helped by the ongoing financial struggles the inhabitants of PM Basti face. When money was short, Amina and Binod have purchased essential items for the school out of their own meager salaries because they want it to succeed. They worry constantly about the school's future and seek practical solutions to their funding problems. "I'd like all of the older students to join the school as volunteer teachers after they graduate. That is my dream. Some of them now teach the smaller children without any salary," said Binod. Amina has plans to expand the masala enterprise so that women can gain an income, surplus profit can be fed into the school, and "the future of the children, lost in darkness today, will also be brightened." This is challenging work, but the fact that over 550 graduates have gone on to join local formal schools since Talimi Haq School started in 1998 is evidence that change *is* taking place.

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TOWARD PEDAGOGY FOR HOPE

Sita Venkateswar

My contact with Talimi Haq School and the efforts of the Howrah Pilot Project has been a gradual and evolving process since 2002, when I first mooted the possibility of formulating a research project that could contribute to the ongoing work of the grassroots organization. The boundaries of the school provided an artificially delimited space,¹⁶ where we could dissolve for the day the social barriers that separated us and the polarities of privilege and impoverishment by which we were marked. I would come and go every day, using every available mode of transport to undertake this daily trek, but at day's end I returned to the confines of my comfortable, family home in suburban Kolkata leaving behind the squalor and degradation that is an indelible aspect of the lives of all my research participants.

The idea for my research project, which I conceived of as an action research project, emerged over the course of discussions with Amina Khatoon and Binod Shaw,¹⁷ two key volunteers in the various areas of outreach by the Howrah Pilot Project. Planned as an initiative in which the students from the school could play a leading role, a group of the most articulate students were provided with the training to survey all the students in the school, both current and former. The survey acquired additional value as an instrument to document and to generate records of all the students of the school, as well as a method to demonstrate the school's achievements since its inception. An unintended result of this effort was that the survey became part of a larger outreach by the school to the community it served. Specifically, it became a way to identify additional roles that Talimi Haq School could play within that community for both children and adults.

Right from the outset, Talimi Haq School was set up to impart "joyful learning" to those whose tenuous links with any form of institutionalized education had been less than joy-full. The volunteer teachers at the school have been enjoined to engage the students in a mode that reawakens a sense of pleasure in

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16. This special kind of space had to be deliberately and assiduously created. This is an illustration of Ramaswamy's role and the style of his interventions over the years, from 1997 to 2000, working assiduously to convey "so many subtle things, communicating with the volunteers, in their language, as equals, as partners, as one's own intimate folk." Ramaswamy's statement is reminiscent of Spivak's description of the slow, patient educational work with "no guarantees" that is required to "suture" the rural subalterns of the Global South with the rest of the polity (Spivak 2008, 23).
 17. Interestingly, in a locality that is spatially organized by religion and where the mobility of women is restricted, the Howrah Pilot Project and Talimi Haq School delimit a space that transgresses such boundaries. They offer the possibility of engaging with the world across these divides as Amina and Binod (who are Muslim and Hindu respectively) jointly demonstrate in their unsparing efforts toward the empowerment of the women and children in that neighborhood.



Children gathered at Talimi Haq School. (Sita Venkateswar)

and from learning.¹⁸ “This was unlike other schools,” recalls Mohammed Wahid Ali, of his time at the school, “the teachers’ love, the numerous trips and best of all, the programs at Science City.” This refrain is voiced repeatedly in similar words by the other children who responded to the question in the survey regarding what they liked best about the school. “Games, computers, picnics, and teachers’ behavior” lists Mohammed Saiada in response to that query. Murshida Khatoon concurs, adding to her list of likes drawing, and “*sattoo*” and “sherbet” (referring to the nutritious meal that the school provided, prior to the government instituted mid-day meal program at state-run schools).¹⁹ Murshida recalls “teaching through play” as a memorable aspect of her time at the school, and “the loving atmosphere,” adds Nasim Khan. “We are rag pickers,” says another child, “we would not have had any other learning opportunities.”

For many of the children on its rolls, Talimi Haq School offers the only opportunity for acquiring some basis for literacy and numeracy. For others, who have dropped out of the government school system, it offers a second chance to resume their primary school education. Many children have been able to use the education provided at the school as a springboard that reinserts them into the formal educational system. Some have availed themselves of opportunities at the school in addition to their attendance at the government school, or even after they completed their schooling. Others, whose expectations of schooling

18. The teachers at the school, who are also from PM Basti, undergo training provided by Sister Cyril of the Loreto School, well known for her work in this area. They are paid a token salary, which certainly does not recompense them for the valuable contribution they make at the school.

19. *Sattoo* and *sherbet*, a meal made of chickpea flour and the water in which it is soaked, is typically eaten and drunk by poor, manual laborers in Bengal and Bihar.

derived from their experience at Talimi Haq School, could not sustain their enthusiasm for learning within the formal school environment. One parent voiced her disappointment thus: “He couldn’t get the kind of attention and affection he received at Talimi Haq School, so he dropped out.”

It is also important to note here that the modest budget²⁰ available for school-related expenses has always prioritised the pedagogical opportunities provided by engaging the children in initiatives outside the classroom. Whether it was through trips to Science City, the museum, or the botanical gardens, these excursions have provided rewarding experiences and an opportunity to put “joyful learning” into practice by linking them with classroom activities. Lorena’s account above is an illustration of how alert, sensitive, and intelligent the children attending the school are, belying the stereotypical stigmatization that attributes to their capacities the deprivation of the environment they inhabit.

In his 2007 review of two recent books on poverty in *The New York Review of Books*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and social commentator Nicholas D. Kristof recalls the predicament of a Cambodian peasant woman whom he met in 1996.²¹ Kristof reports that the woman had to choose which of her several children would sleep inside the one mosquito net available to the family when she put them to bed every night. It brought home to him the kind of existential impasse that daily confronts people mired in poverty. “[I]t is not so much the pain of hunger or the humiliation of rags,” he goes on to say, “but the impossible choices you face.”

If you can only afford school fees for some of your children, which do you send? If you must choose between medical treatment for Dad, the breadwinner, or for Daughter, the A student, which is it? Do you use your savings to provide a good dowry so Eldest Daughter can get a decent husband, or do you settle for the drunkard who will beat her and instead invest the savings in a food cart that may help provide an income to send the younger ones to school?²²

In the context of choices such as these we examine the interventions of a nonformal school such as Talimi Haq School and the options that it provides for imparting learning to the children of some of the poorest, Muslim families in Howrah. The Sachar Committee Report released in 2006 reveals that the human development index for the Muslim population is the lowest in the country. (The spatial markers for the slum corroborate this point, as Ramaswamy explains above.)²³ Every aspect of life in this neighborhood — one of the oldest industrial slums of greater Kolkata — is a visible reminder of the social iniquities that are an integral part of quotidian existence for its inhabitants.²⁴

Is it possible at this stage to obtain a sense of some likely outcomes for the children who have studied at Talimi Haq School? Not yet; they are mostly intan-

20. Over the years, much of that budget has been derived from contributions and donations by friends and other well-wishers.

21. Kristof 2007.

22. Ibid. 34.

23. Sachar Committee Report 2006.



Volunteer teachers at Talimi Haq School: Yasmin, Amina and Rehana (from left, sitting) and Binod (standing). (Sita Venkateswar)

gible at this time of writing. Moreover, it is subscribing to a misplaced optimism if we “turn a blind eye to the historical, economic and social reasons”²⁵ that bear on the concrete, material reality and the intractable problems that beset the inhabitants of this basti. Talimi Haq School is only one small element in that

totality. But it is one that has enabled some children to dream of a different future. Mohammed Nasi wants to become a doctor “so that no poor is without access to medical assistance.” Murshida Khatoon wants to study further and become a police officer, a radical ambition for a girl from her circumstances. Most want “to get a good job” and be able to support themselves and their families. Mohammed Wahid Ali wants to establish “his own photographic studio so that I can ensure my sisters are married well,” highlighting the fact that these individual dreams are enmeshed within and inseparable from a nest of reciprocal familial obligations and responsibilities. One wants to become a “maulvi and be respected across the world for my knowledge of Islam,” another wants to “study and become a good person.” These are modest dreams and aspirations, like the efforts of the school, but they all affirm the statement in the epigraph at the beginning of this article, “I want to read and write so that I can change the world.”²⁶

In his 2007 review Kristof notes:

a liberal squeamishness about confronting the reality that one important element that sustains poverty is culture: a self-destructive pathology that arises from poverty and then entraps the poor in it for generation after generation.... [T]his culture involves elements of hopelessness, substance abuse, underinvestment in education, self-fulfilling expectations of failure and squandered resources...but the best single investment to gain long-term dignity is education, and that’s the way to break the cycle....

24. Nobel Prize-winner Amartya Sen’s December 2009 report on the state of primary school education in West Bengal, particularly with respect to socially disadvantaged groups such as the Muslims in the state, concludes with an urgent appeal for action: “There is indeed need for some urgency here, since the problems are serious and involve long-standing injustice to millions of young children that call for rectification. Patience can be, alas, another name for continuing injustice.” “Primary schooling: I — A report on improvements and problems in West Bengal schools,” *The Telegraph*, 19 December 2009; “Primary schooling: II — Private tuition, home tasks and class boundaries,” *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2009.

25. Freire 1994, 8.

26. Cited in Friere 1973, 50.

[O]ne reason for the underinvestment in education is that illiterate parents can't judge what investments in education will pay off.²⁷

Sekena Yacoobi, an Afghani woman whose story Kristof recounts in his 2009 book, articulates a similar view: "Education is the key issue for overcoming poverty," she states, "if people are educated then they will also stand up and say, my child should not be married so young."²⁸

None of the several aspirations voiced by the participants in this account may survive to withstand the obstacles presented by the precariousness of their socioeconomic circumstances or the exigencies of making a living from that context. Only time will tell. But it is the choices that they make in the future, in their aspirations for their own children, that the flicker of a nascent hope may reignite, and in their memories of the joy of learning that they first encountered at Talimi Haq School. It is here that the pedagogy of hope imbued in their experience of "joyful learning" imparted at Talimi Haq School will finally be manifest, in the investments that the students from that school make toward the education of their own children in the future. □

Reflections on Collaborative Practice

This narrative in three voices offers overlapping perspectives of PM Basti and Talimi Haq School. In this article, we have not attempted to merge our individual and separate personas into a seamless, singular authorial voice. Instead, our effort has been to provide a series of viewpoints grounded in distinct practices, in which each account is successively enriched by the ones that precede or follow it.

Each contributor's brief in this article was to construct a narrative that was faithful to his/her experience of that context.²⁹ Thus, Ramaswamy voices his anger and accumulated despair,³⁰ emanating from his involvement as an activist, working to both sustain and repair the erosion of a community's efforts to improve the conditions of their lives. Gibson's "hands on" participant-observation project enables her to get close to many individuals within the community, to recount a polyvocal, "thick description" of her experience of teaching at Talimi

27. Kristof 2007, 34 (emphasis added). This attribute is also characteristic of PM Basti.

28. Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 164.

29. Hence, this report presents an account based on a series of *qualitative* approaches to describe and explicate a context, begging the question of why we have not thought to include a more *quantitative* component to our endeavor. We did, but it is not included in this final iteration for reasons beyond our control. The researcher from an institute in Kolkata, with whom we collaborated on this project, was responsible for coordinating a large-scale demographic survey of PM Basti. That data was to follow the background section, enumerating and augmenting it with figures from the survey. But the researcher was unable to complete his section and hence this report now represents the sum of a qualitative effort, sutured together, to provide a "partial" view (Appadurai 1992) of a grassroots organization and one of its initiatives in a Muslim slum in West Bengal.

30. And thereby challenging the neutral, more dispassionate tone more typical of academic writing!

Haq School. Venkateswar's more distanced and analytical voice reflects both her intimacy and detachment from the context: the emic and the etic embodied by the familiarity of half a lifetime spent in the city, tethered to the objectivity deriving from the other half spent away as an anthropologist. Such an ethic is also manifest in the survey that she initiated, one that the teachers and students conducted and used according to their own needs. The survey and its outcomes (both intended and unintended) enable her to discern a basis for hope that defies the urban squalor of the basti and embraces the joyful learning that the residents of PM Basti have discovered at Talimi Haq School.

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