BOOK REVIEWS

Gupta, Latika. *Education, Poverty and Gender. Schooling Muslim girls in India.* Routledge India 2015, 165 pp.

This book presents a very competent and intense study of 25 Muslim girls in Grade XI in a school in Old Delhi, only identified as MGS (Muslim Girls' School) to spare both the school and the girls unwanted curiosity. Of course it would not be very difficult to find the school with a bit of effort but few people would take the trouble and the time. Gupta describes in detail the sordid entrance to the school among overflowing sewers, fumes from a mechanic repair shop, a urinal (p. 63). Hardly a welcoming entrance!

One would have liked to learn more about the functioning of the MGS. It is mentioned in passing that there are 650 girls in the school. How were they admitted? On what criteria? The school is government sponsored and hence free, at least for girls (p. 3). What are the subjects taught? How many teachers work at the school? How does the teaching function? Very little is said about what is actually taught in the school. It is stated that the school "follows the curriculum prepared by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and uses all its textbooks" (p. 4), but it is never explained what that curriculum consists of. A reader not already familiar with the NCERT curriculum is left in the dark.

Gupta says: "Every class has about 55 to 60 students, but the average attendance was never more than 30." (p.65). This is an astounding statement. What do the girls actually do in the school? Is the school simply a place to spend the time away from home with its

inevitable household chores? The girls seem to spend considerable time loitering in the corridors or on the dilapidated terrace of the school where teachers seldom go. But how do they learn anything without attending classes?

“The medium of instruction for all subjects is Urdu, while Hindi and English are studied as extra languages.” (p. 4). Important notices posted outside the principal’s office are in Urdu, and a few in Hindi (p. 63).

The girls have presumably learnt to read and write in Hindi in government-run schools before being admitted to MGS at Grade VI. It is not clarified which script the girls use when writing essays: the modified Persian script normally used for Urdu, or the Devanagari script used for Hindi. Or both? In her quotations from the essays Gupta specifies that they are “translated from Hindi”.

Gupta concentrated her study on 25 girls in Grade XI, because “this grade... [involves] a critical decision...[namely] ...’the choice of subject stream” (p. 43). What are these subjects? Apart from mentioning that history (p.44) and political science – “a compulsory subject ...in grades XI and XII” (p. 119) – are taught, there is no mention what else is taught in the school.

Another strange thing is that only the head girl of the class has the timetable and she presumably informs the girls when they arrive what the day’s timetable is (p. 65). It would have been very helpful if Gupta had told us what the time table looks like from day to day for the different classes.

Homework is only mentioned once in a table about illness when one girl states that her sisters help her with the homework when she is sick (Table 5.25, p.130).

One could venture to say that the word ‘education’ in the title of this book is somewhat misleading, since the girls do not seem to learn much, at least not in the academic sense. The ‘education’ seems to consist entirely of teaching the girls to be good Muslim girls, i.e. submissive wives and mothers. This ‘education’ is the same at home and in the school.

As a grammarian I must confess I find the transliterations from Hindi/Urdu quite exasperating. There are several recognized scientific ways of transliterating Hindi and Urdu, none of which has been applied here. Sadly, most anthropologists, sociologists, educationists,

meteorologists, historians, political scientists etc. etc. never seem to get a competent linguist to do the transliterations for them.

This is in many ways a very sad book. Gupta amply illustrates how circumscribed and restricted a Muslim girl's life is, especially if she belongs to the lower/lowest class. Going from home to the school seems to be the only allowed outing, and contacts outside of the home and the school non-existent. To continue studying after Grade VIII is considered an unnecessary luxury for a girl whose only goal in life is to become a submissive wife and mother. The family and the community regulate everything in a girl's life: what she can wear, if she can watch television or not, what she can read, to which bazaar she can go, etc. etc. In other words the poor Muslim girl's life is entirely regulated by "the power of patriarchy as an overarching reality" (p. 142). Or as Krishna Kumar emphatically states in his foreword "the greatest of all known human institutions: patriarchy." (p. xvi).

As a young scholar Latika Gupta has to show that she is familiar with the theoretical studies in her field. She is using all the current buzzwords such as gender/gendering, narrative/narrativize, identity, phenomenology, and so on. This is part of the rules of the game. This book makes it clear that Dr. Gupta is a very accomplished scholar in this respect. This will hopefully have the result that she does not have to show her theoretical competence in her future books, but instead concentrate on what she really does very well, namely her keen and precise gift of observation, attention to revealing details, and obvious talent for conducting productive interviews with her subjects, something which requires intelligence, tact and compassion. She can henceforth confidently apply Goethe's well-known dictum, uttered by Mephisto, the devil, in Faust:

"Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,/ Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum."

"Dear friend, all theory is grey, and the golden tree of life [is] green."

We are looking forward to Latika Gupta's next book.

Stella Sandahl
University of Toronto