

CAMMO JAFFER SULEIMAN GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL

For the past one year, I have been trying to document the social and economic life in Mohammed Ali Road area, one of the oldest Muslim resident and commercial hub in the city of Bombay / Mumbai. The native area as it was known together with Kalbadevi and Girgaon , was a cultural mosaic of the different Muslim sects ,coexisting peacefully though generally confined to their Mohallas, cantered around mosques or Jamat khanas .The earliest settlers were the Konkani Muslims followed by the Memons the Khojas , the Bohras mainly from Kutch and Gujarat , and then joined by Muslims from various parts of the country .Each of the communities tried to contribute to the welfare and educational, economic and social up-liftment of the members of their community .Their endeavours can be seen in the form of trusts , schools ,colleges ,madrassas , libraries etc.

One such institution is The Cammo Jaffer Suleiman Girls high school which started as a Madrasa in 1935 by two brothers Cammo and Jaffer Seth , who came from Kutch and began life as vegetable sellers but soon set up other businesses . Keen to educate the girls from their community , the madrassa was converted to a primary school which soon progressed to secondary and now it is a high school with a Junior and Degree College, housed in a six storied building on Kambekar street in the lane of Minara Masjid ,close to Mandvi Post office .

The street is very congested lined by a number of bakeries including the famous Suleiman Bakery and a chain of slipper shops and kiosks and just as I am wondering how a school can function in this area ,I see a number of girls in smart school uniforms(check frocks and white salwar -duppattas) coming out of an imposing building .

“Why did the brothers have to build a school here- in this congested area?” I ask the principal, the dynamic Nilofer Kasu who had once dreamt of being an IPS officer but was now content to contribute to the aspirations of hundreds of young girls from disadvantaged sections.

“I don’t think it was congested then and Mrs Azeeza Gaya one of the retired principals who studied here in the fifties and sixties says all these bakeries and slipper shops were not there .Only Suleiman and Zam Zam . It was nice and spacious.”

Sad I think, looking at the bright eager faces of the girls. They would have loved to run around and play games.

“Are they all from the Memon community? I ask remembering the objective of the founders.

“Very few .Many of them now go to convent schools .There are very few girls from well to do families for Urdu medium though now we have started English from first standard .Most of our students are from the lower income group and from slum areas of Wadala and Sewri –those who cannot afford English education .But in the Junior College where we have English medium , there are quite a few from the middleclass .Their parents feel it is better for them to continue their college education here .”

“Wadala and Sewri "I repeat.”Why do they have to come here?”

“The Urdu Municipal School there is only up till seventh and it is co-education .Hence most parents prefer to send the girls here from sixth standard onwards.”

“Is it safe for them to travel?”

“We have a bus for them; it is free.”

Since I wanted to meet some of the students, two girls from the eighth standard Nida and Nafeesa ,both 13 and in the 8th standard were called in .They were from Sewri , and had been studying at the New Tank Bunder Road Municipal school. Nafeesa a daughter of a helper had three brothers who were studying in Habib school while Nida, a daughter of a crane operator had five brothers and two sisters .The brothers were driving taxis and were not keen on studies but she wanted to be an engineer and the sparkle in her eyes and confident tone assured me she definitely would. And so would Nafeesa who wanted to be a teacher .The liked being in Cammo Jaffer, where the teachers took pains to make them learn unlike the Municipal school where they had earlier studied.

Looking at their bright eager faces, I was reminded of another group in MS Academy in Hyderabad which coached Muslim girls and boys for the medical entrance examination and of the top ten students, seven were girls! So I thought given a chance girls not only do as well but many times outshine the boys.

And it is just not just textbook learning that the school wanted to impart :they also wanted the girls to physically defend themselves . Hence they were imparted Karate training and for this, as they were facing paucity of space they had hired rooms from the nearby Municipal school.

From the drawing examinations and elocution competition and debates conducted, I realised that the principal and teachers were keen to improve the standard of education and ensure all round development of the students.

“We have 100%results “ announced Nilufer with pride and listed the names of the girl students who had achieved success in different careers .I congratulated her and her team and hoped that every mohalla would have such a girls school and there will be more Nida’s and Nafeesa’s in the community .Cammo and Jaffer Suleimans endeavours had brought new light in the life of girls from the marginalised sections and that I consider a greater achievement than the narrow one of catering to one’s own sect .

As I walked out of the school building, the Muezzins call for the afternoon prayers echoed over the din of traffic.