

MUMBRA - A Muslim Ghetto

For the past twenty years or so ,I had been hearing about Mumbra - the largest Muslim Ghetto in the country .Located in Thana , the Mumbra –Kausa stretch of 10km ,once a fishing village at the confluence of the Ulhas River and the Thana creek- the area witnessed an upsurge in its population in 1992/1993 in the wake of the Mumbai riots when thousands of Muslims fled here from majority dominated areas ,seeking a haven here . An area in this Mumbra Kausa was allocated by the Wakf board for the settlements of these families .But many more families from North India migrated and as per 2011 census , the population is nearly 9lacs as against 44000 in 1991 .Nearly 80% of the population is Muslim .

With the concentration of Muslims specially from the low income groups , and working class in Mumbra ,a number of Muslim NGO's such as Anjuman- e-Islam , MESCO , Awaz-Niswan set up units and schools to cater to the populace . I was particularly interested in visiting Sahara set up by the Anjuman initially as a shelter for destitute woman which was later converted into a vocational training center .Awaz-e Niswan set up Rehnuma , a library and research center on women issues .MESCO started a well equipped school providing quality education .While I was thinking of visiting Sahara and Rehnuma , Mumbra was in the news for the Ishrat Jehan case as she hailed from this area . The demography and concentration of Muslims, mushrooming of illegal structures gave the place a sinister reputation :It became synonymous with crime .

Then I was quite surprised to learn that taking into consideration the grievances of the community that the area was neglected in terms of infrastructure , schools banks etc , the State Minority Commission commissioned a study report from the Tata Institute of Social Studies to identify the deficit areas and suggest improvements .The Study was conducted under the guidance of Ranu Jain , Professor and Chairperson Center for Studies in Sociology of Education .The Study brought out the dismal condition of the infrastructure and the pathetic state of education in Mmbra- Kausa .It was an eye opener to learn that though hundreds of schools had mushroomed which was indicative of the desire for education almost 90%were substandard .The condition of women despite the two NGO's set up for their welfare was deplorable .

But last year I was pleasantly surprised to read about Parcham an organization which advocates for open spaces for girls and women and engages with the authorities to provide facilities for participation of girls in sports .They had also raised funds through publication of a 2016 Diary(costing Rs 500 each which highlighted the role of Muslim Women in Indian History . I bought quite a few copies and distributed it to the Principals of ten well known Muslim girls schools requesting them to spread the message around .None of the Principals did ,nor did they appreciate the gesture of sending the diaries .They gave the impression that I was wasting their time . Anyway , I felt inspired when Parcham organized the first girls football match at Shimla Park Mumbra which was widely reported . Ehsas for Women also carried a feature on it .

With so much happening , I decided to visit Mumbra and see , the ghetto . On 28th June I caught a Kalyan bound train at about 1130 and was at Thane by 12 pm . I was surprised that there were hardly any burqua clad or hijab wearing women in the compartment .

After Kalwa ,from where I glimpsed the Parsik Hill range and the Thane Creek , the train passed through lush greenery punctuated by weather beaten apartment blocks and rickety hutments .As we approached Mumbra , the hutments and jhuggis predominated , though relieved by the picturesque scene of the Ulhasnagar river joining the Thana creek and a view of the Parsik Hill atop which is the Mumbra Devi temple dedicated to the deity of the Kolis and Ahirs –the original inhabitants of Mumbra .Mumbra was also a flourishing ship building yard in the seventh century and this activity was replaced by ship repairs in the 17th and 18th .Today neither shipbuilding or repair is carried out and Reti Bunder only has a few broken dilapidated boats.

At Mumbra station where only slow trains halted , there were a few bearded men or burqua clad women on the platform .Outside I approached a share rikshaw just as two burqua clad women also did and said they wanted to go to Kausa Qabarastan .The auto driver nodded and they sat in it .He then looked at me .I hesitantly said “Dar ul Falah “ and he nodded and said, “come along .” I wondered whether the Qabrastan and the Madrasa were in the same compound .He charged each of us Rs 10 .As we proceeded a km or two into the city , I was quite impressed :the crowd was cosmopolitan , the roads wide ,but as we neared Kausa , the place got crowded with tempos ,handcarts scooters ,motor bikes, pedestrians, hawkers and pheriwallahs and burqa clad women and bearded men .A number of make shift eateries and bakeries lined the road-most of these s old chicken tikka , Kababs and other non-veg fare familiar in Muslim dominated areas .I knew that I was at Kausa and Darul Falah .I was however surprised to see the Huge glass and chrome building next to the Darul Falah mosque .I was told it was the Madrassa and I saw a number of boys between 10and 16 years, in ankle length pyjamas ,long knee length kurtas and skull cap moving in and out of the building .

I walked past the Madrassah and the lane led to a dirt track between a row of buildings which resembled used card board boxes piled up . At the far end I sighted the Sahara unit located on the ground floor which was originally meant for shops .Later ,I learnt that the place had been donated for the unit by the Malkani builders . The Sahara Project was initiated by Mrs. Sikander ,one of the Trustees of Anjuman-e-Islam under the Project officer Noorjehan Peerzade now Noorjehan Safia Niaz ,founding member of BMMA which is spearheading the movement for abolition of Triple Talaq and codification of Muslim Law .Noor jehan a trained social worker with a Masters in Social Work(MSW) had imparted para professional training in Social work to a number of volunteers with a basic qualification of at least 12th standard pass . one of them Ms Ayesha looked after the work when Ms NoorJehan left until the new incumbent Manisha Markhande a trained social worker with a MSW degree joined.

Manisha who had been with the unit for the last twenty years was waiting to receive me .The place was abuzz with young ,smiling pretty girls in burqua or hijab . They had enrolled for various courses run by Sahara such as tailoring ,beauty care , Mehendi designs and cookery . It was difficult to believe that these charming well groomed girls came from lower middle class families . The center charged Rs 250 per month for the course .which according to Manisha was very reasonable as their training programmes were professional and quite popular .The teacher who taught tailoring showed me the sample book of the dresses stitched .It was very impressive as designing was also incorporated in the course .I was informed that many of the girls and women trained here have either set up small tailoring units or stitch

in their houses contracting the work from professional tailors and as a well tailored salwar suit fetches Rs300 , they earn a decent sum within the privacy of their homes

“But now a day’s cooking has also become very popular .It has regained its prior importance as people have become health conscious and are keen to try a variety of cuisine .Children too are demanding :they want burgers ,pizzas , pastas , cookies, Chinese south Indian dishes and Gujrati Farsan .So here besides traditional dishes for regular meals we also teach continental ,Chinese , baking etc .”

The trainees had prepared chicken tikka that day and served a plate with two pieces .It was delicious .

“What about those doing the beauty course .Are they setting up their beauty parlors ? I asked

“ It is difficult given the scarcity of recourses and unavailability of credit.” Manisha said. She introduced me to two girls who were undergoing the course .One of them was a Keralite , a mother of three children whose husband was working in the Gulf .She sent her children to the school run by MESCO and said that she was one of the few people who could afford the fees .When I asked her if she was to going to start a Beauty Parlor , she said it will depend on her husband’s wishes . For the present he has given permission to attend the course .

This was the general refrain :the women seem to exercise no choice be it in choosing a career ,a marriage partner ,employment , number of children or for that matter even in matters of dress .It all depended on the male guardian , be it husband , father ,brother or son . There were a few exceptions ,in matter of wearing hijab or burqua .One of the girls had out of choice taken the naqab .She said she felt safer with her face covered .She was the only child of her parent which was an exception as the general size of families is on an average of four children .And many of these families comprising of six or seven members live in one room tenements .Ms Ayesha who has now retired had cited the example of Srilanka colony which had a number of unauthorized seven floor buildings without lifts where one room tenements were rented out to large families for Rs2000 or so!

I was taken round the Sahara Center .It was neat and clean . One room was occupied by the Sahara Sponsorship Project unit headed by Mumtaz , a smart young girl .The unit takes care of donations and sponsorships for meritorious children from economically backward families . The center also has a counseling section for marital problems which functions in the afternoon.

Earlier , according to Ayesha , the social workers used to make field visits , as also act as facilitators to get ration cards etc for the economically backward families . This activity has declined in the past few years . When I inquired if they have any contact with the Darul Falah management , they replied in the negative .

From Sahara , I walked to Rehnuma Library Center , a short distance away and met the in charge Yasmin .The center is housed in a small flat, the walls are lined with bookshelves from ground to roof .The center conducts writing and photography classes ,adult literacy and English teaching classes. Since the place seemed congested , I suggested that they could take help from the Darul Falah which seemed to have ample space but Yasmin was reluctant to contact them .

“They will not help us .” She said

“But they have such a huge building .Must be having considerable funding .”

“Yes .There are always funds for these places .It is only for women’s education , health , welfare or empowerment that no funds are available .” She said despondently.

“The best women are those who are neither seen or heard , and you people at the Awaz- -e Niswan are going against this ideal .So why do you expect funds ?”I said with a laugh .

“ Don’t give us funds for our activities . But what about hospitals and schools . This place has no hospital .One has to go to Kalwa for treatment . And the private schools they are deplorable . Now that many illegal structures are abolished ,we hope the government will build schools and hospitals ,”one of the girls sitting in the Library quipped .

“Any way in your own modest way your center and Sahara are doing your bit for improving the lot of woman .”

Yasmin nodded .”Lets hope more will join us .”

I hoped too as I made my way back to the station .It was a pity that such a lovely place had such desultory and rundown appearance . With proper planning , infrastructure and integrated economic development , the place could really be a haven with its back drop of hills and the river , the creek and the rich vegetation around it . I sighed as I boarded the train to Dadar .

A few months later I was pleased to see a message on What’s Up that the Association of Muslim Professionals(AMP) were undertaking a mass contact program organizing Skill Development and Career Guidance lectures in schools and colleges as well as a job fair in Mumbra .

This was really good news .I was sure more organizations will join and make it a model town ,a sought after residential area whose residence will not carry the stigma they do today .