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Muslim Girls Favour Secular Education

RESHMA Khatoon, 13, has a new sense of purpose. When she grows up, she wants to be a doctor.

She knows it is not going to be easy to realize her dream. Hers is a typical lower middle class Muslim family and in their social setup, girls are taught the Quran some household chores and a few skills, then married off.

Reshma had been attending junior madrasa, the school run by mosques, where she was taught only the holy scriptures.

Now she goes to the general Government School in Calcutta.

Says Reshma, "I would never have known what I was missing if my grandmother, critically ill, was not rushed to the hospital."

It was admiration for the attending doctor at Central Calcutta's Islamia Hospital that made Reshma think about getting a secular education. "My grandmother got a new lease on life and I the inspiration for a lifetime," she says.

The transfer was a difficult decision for Reshma's father, since it meant antagonizing the religious head of the area who was also the madrasa school principal.

But more Muslim girls have been leaving the madrasa midway. The age limit for admission to most main-

stream schools is five, and the madrasa which takes five years is not completed until they turn 10.

Even the more orthodox Muslim parents are bowing to their daughters' demand to join a general school. Though known as a hafeez, or one who knows the holy book Quran by heart, Mohammed Ahmad Qureishi had given in to daughter Saira Khatoon's desire to study in an English medium school. Saira, now in the ninth grade, wants to become an English teacher.

"Muslim girls are trying to catch up fast because they realize that they are at least 50 years behind their sisters in other communities," says professor Naser Ali Mirza who used to head the English department of Maulana Azad College in Calcutta.

Asif Ali Mirza, principal of an English medium school, says this is not an anti-Islamic sentiment because Islam does not discourage women from getting an education.

"The new generation is challenging traditional mores and questioning

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the ethics of a society that keeps women in the shackles of religion," says S.A. Khan of Bowbazar's Shiva Day School.

Muslim women have also been responding to literacy campaigns in the districts and have done well in the evaluation tests. In many districts, 80 per cent of neo-literates are Muslims and over half of them are women. Those who become literate are given primary education at the adult education centres.

If West Bengal in northeast India has seen a drastic change in the attitude of Muslim families, Haryana state in the north is not far behind.

There is a keenness to educate the girl child even among poor Muslim families. In one village, the girls' school founded by the village head two years ago has become the means by which the 2,000-odd Muslim families are being introduced into mainstream education, so different from the cocooned environs of the traditional madrasa.

However, another problem is language. Muslims want to be educated

in Urdu, but can they demand it? Urdu seems a dying language, with the government showing scant interest in reviving its use.

In government-run schools, there are no teachers to teach Urdu to Muslim children. As parent Mohamed Javed says, "Why should we send our children to government schools which do not teach Urdu?"

In the village school for girls mentioned, one of the first things that had to be done was to hire a teacher in Urdu. This removed any reluctance by Muslim parents about sending their daughters to the school, which now has about 150 pupils.

Muslim families are still keen that their children learn the Quran, but they also realize that the madrasas are ill-equipped for modern-day learning.

This is deplored by Maulana Assayed Abu Ali Sahib, head teacher of the Madrasa Maktab-e-Imamia which is one of the oldest primary madrasas in Calcutta.

Madrasa education, he admits, is basically a religious education. "But what, in essence, is religion? Isn't it the embodiment of values?"

Says Sayed Zahir Hossain Jafree, "In the past the Madrasa system produced a lot of professionals. Why can't it do it now?" *Depthnews Asia*.