**Left in the dark: Night schools in Mumbai**

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In the *Evening* *Standard*, I read an article (Chari and Aligh 2023) on the dreams of night school-going women in Mumbai. The article presents the difficulties faced by night schools such as lack of funding and poor infrastructure. The authors’ description of their struggles, and determination to study, compelled me to question - why would anyone give up rest and decide to sit in a classroom after a long day of work?

Kumar’s (2019) historical perspective of attending night schools conceptualises this act as reclaiming ownership over one’s time against the mainstream forms and structures of schooling which have pushed these individuals out of the normative system. Since their inception in 1874 in Mumbai, these spaces have undergone many changes. It further piqued my curiosity to examine how these schools have evolved in response to changes in education policies.

**Where are night schools located?**

[Figure 1]

Source: Author’s work, available [here](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1EPSzZ-xEfOT8iUSp4jo3wdlqVSX244c&usp=sharing).

Note: The red and green icons represent operational and permanently closed night schools.

Night schools first started as part of the labour movement against the cotton mills' working hours (Kumar 2019). After the closure of mills in the 1980s and a wave of de-industrialisation, large parcels of land in prime locations of Mumbai became extremely valuable. This displaced the working classes to the peripheries of Greater and suburban Mumbai. Night schools, which catered to the working class, also accordingly shifted towards the outskirts. The map below signifies that the majority of night schools located in and around the cotton mill wards are permanently closed now.

[Figures 2 and 3]

Source: Frazier (2019) and Author’s work.

**How are night schools different from ‘regular’ day schools?**

Legally, night schools are defined as secondary schools teaching for half the daily working hours of a day school to students of more than 11 years of age who are unable to attend day schools owing to their daily vocations. They typically start in the evenings and go on for three to three and a half hours. Evidently, one of the key differences between day and night schools is the number of teaching hours. They also cater to students coming from diverse backgrounds and learning levels. While these factors allow individuals with limited resources to continue their education, they also present a challenge for night school teachers to complete their duties and work for the betterment of their students.

The regulatory framework recognises these teachers as ‘part-time’ with only half the salary of full-time teachers and almost no benefits. One teacher shared -

हमारा विद्यालय सिर्फ 3 घंटे चलता है परंतु हमारा काम भी उतना ही है। हमें भी वही विषय पढ़ाने होते है एवं विद्यार्थियों को भी वही परीक्षा देनी होती है। कोई फरक नही है। इसलिए हमें भी उतना ही सैलरी देना चाहिए, जितना day स्कू वाले शिक्षकों को मिलता है।

(Our school may work only for three hours but we have the same workload. We have to teach the same syllabus and our students also have to appear for the same exams. There is no difference. We should also earn the same salary as our day school counterparts.)

Government Resolutions (GR) in Maharashtra have made frequent changes to the appointment and working conditions of night school staff. As part of a series of cost-cutting measures in 2017, a GR restricted day school teachers from working in both day and night schools, and directed the appointment of surplus staff (who were drawing salaries) to night schools. However, these changes disrupted the working of night schools – with only 174 surplus teachers appointed in place of around 865 who were terminated. Furthermore, teachers working regularly in night schools had developed a bond with their students and their sudden replacement fractured this mutual understanding. Eventually in 2022, another GR allowed day school teachers to work in night schools, thus restoring the previous manner of operations (Department of School Education and Sports, 2017 and 2022). Despite this, the shortage of teachers resulted in poor student attendance rates and drop-outs which ultimately led to the closure of some schools.

The changes brought by GRs suggest how the government views teachers and their profession as easily replaceable, and highlights the lack of autonomy and reflexivity in their work and teaching practices. Appointments and hourly pay scales of staff, limited funding and involvement in schools are indicative of new public management practices in education and night schools are no exception to this.

**How do night schools function?**

One of the main avenues of financing secondary schools, including night schools, comes from the grants-in-aid mechanism. This was introduced as a way for the government to devolve greater responsibility of direct management to private institutions while retaining some control through the flow of funds (Rani, 2003). Night schools are now predominantly managed by private entities such as charitable societies and educational trusts with government aid whereas the government-managed ones have permanently closed between 2018 and 2021.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Mode of provisioning** | | **Number** | **Current Status** |
| **Management** | **Financing** |  |  |
| Government | Aided | 22 | Permanently Closed |
| Private | Aided (Fully or Partly) | 80 | Operational |
| Private (Recognised) | Unaided | 1 | Operational |
| Local body | Aided (Fully or Partly) | 2 | Operational |

Source: Author’s work, data collected from School Report Cards of night schools on UDISE+

While the reasons for closure are unclear, it may be speculated as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the decreased role of the state’s involvement in the provisioning of secondary education, and lopsided changes in the regulations.

**Concluding thoughts**

Night schools play a significant role in offering a space for the working class to find some time for themselves. At the same time, with the state’s receding role and uneven provisioning as argued above, it may be a site for reproducing certain forms of inequities given that these spaces work at the margins and start from a place of disadvantage. At present, it appears that the government is on its way to revamp the night school policy (The Indian Express, 2022) which is likely to bring with it a new set of problems. While none of the staff were aware of these developments, they remain more than prepared to take on any challenges thrown at them. Until then, they continue to remain in the dark.

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