



PROJECT MUSE®

---

The "War on Terror," and Withdrawing American Charity: Some  
Consequences for Poor Muslim Women in Kolkata, India

Suchitra Samanta

Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism, Volume 4, Number 2,  
2004, pp. 137-167 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mer.2004.0033>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/168469>

# The “War on Terror,” and Withdrawing American Charity

## *Some Consequences for Poor Muslim Women in Kolkata, India*

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington have moved Americans to grief and anger, and much of the world to grieve with them. The attacks have also, among many Americans as well as parts of the non-Islamic world, led to the vilification of Muslims in general for exclusivist religious beliefs. For many, such beliefs have found especial focus in the perceived “repression” of (all!) Islamic women. The retaliatory U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, for which the primary objective was expressly to capture Osama bin Laden and remove the terrorist-harboring Taliban, also aimed at “liberating” Afghan women. My paper discusses the apparent consequences of the American “war on terror” for a private American donor agency working in a largely Muslim slum area in Kolkata,<sup>1</sup> and for the women who live there.

Lila Abu-Lughod, commenting on American claims of “liberating” and “saving” Afghan women in its “war on terror” against the Taliban, refers to the old history of such rhetoric from the West (Abu-Lughod 2002). Noting Gayatri Spivak’s comment on white men saving brown women from brown men (Spivak 1988), Abu-Lughod traces such rhetoric back to turn-of-the-century Egypt, where the veil was denigrated as a sign of oppression by Lord Cromer, who simultaneously opposed women’s suffrage back home in England. In India, practices like sati (the immolation of widows on their husband’s funeral pyres), and child marriage were used to justify British

[Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism 2004, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 137–167]  
©2004 by Smith College. All rights reserved.

colonial rule, while the French in Algeria unveiled Muslim women in “well-choreographed” ceremonies as symbolic justification for their occupation of that country (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785, citing Lazreg 1994, 135). More recently, Laura Bush couches the rhetoric of liberating the Muslim woman in terms of human (and women’s) rights: “The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (U.S. Government 2002, cited in Abu-Lughod 2002, 784). Framing the issues in these terms, Abu-Lughod argues, ignores the political and historical explanations for human suffering. The focus, rather, is upon cultural and religious aspects of Islamic womanhood. She notes that such a focus has not been brought to bear on Christian women (in, say, Guatemala, or Ireland, or Bosnia), and concludes:

A more productive approach . . . is to ask how we might contribute to making the world a more just place. A world not organized around strategic military and economic demands; a place where certain kinds of forces and values that we may still consider important could have an appeal and where there is the peace necessary for discussions, debates, and transformations to occur within communities . . . . Where we seek to be active in the affairs of distant places, can we do so in the spirit of support for those within those communities whose goals are to make women’s (and men’s) lives better . . . ? Can we use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation? (Abu-Lughod 2002, 789)

As of this writing (April 2003), the Taliban (from Southern Afghanistan) have been removed from power by the American military campaign, begun in October 2001. However, the Loya Jirga or Interim Council, composed largely of the Northern Alliance and headed by Hamid Karzai, have some ways to go before a democratic government can ensure the rights of Afghan women. The Northern Alliance warlords have a murky record on women’s rights themselves. Despite the American media’s claims that Afghan women have cast off their *burqas* (in one rather simplistic and ethnocentric view of Muslim women’s “liberation”), it is noteworthy that in street or market scenes on television it is rare to see a woman without some form of “veiling,” either a *burqa* that covers her from head to toe, or a head scarf that leaves her face bare.<sup>2</sup> Though television offers a glimpse of beauty salons being opened up again, and women returning to university

and to teaching, this is in Kabul, where Karzai rules precariously, under heavy international security. In the South, we read today that the Taliban is reorganizing again, taking its opportunity while the USA is occupied with its new war (and its aftermath) in Iraq. If anything, women are buying even more *burquas*. In a newspaper report,<sup>3</sup> a shopkeeper in Mazar-e-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan claims that his *burqa* sales have gone up from ten a week (under the Taliban) to over a hundred a week.

“Freeing” women, of any religious or cultural shade, is evidently easier said than done. Abu-Lughod suggests that “culture” (for Muslim women) is seen as separate from and more visible than issues of “structural violence,” such as women suffering from malnutrition, poverty, ill health, and lack of access to education. Thus, she claims, the concept remains unpoliticized, unlike issues of race and class. I would add that such lack of visibility is especially so for the lay Western observer—where the concept of “culture” itself is associated with the “primitive,” his stone-age technology, and “strange” rituals at worst, and to the peoples of the developing world, at best—a concept, in other words, generally associated with people of color.<sup>4</sup> From a transnational perspective, being blind to the politics of “culture” (for example, in the context of Muslim women’s “liberation”) results in a curious irony, and dangerous consequences. On the one hand, “culture,” as the colorful customs of tribal and other “backward” peoples provides an exotic appeal, which should be left alone both from a politically correct, postmodern viewpoint, as also to preserve some vestige of the “noble savage,” the world that once was. On the other, where politically expedient, “culture” may require a definite makeover by the West. Hence (now) the need to “liberate” Afghan women, despite calls to their plight by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), and Western feminists much before September 11. Where atrocities suffered by women are at issue (here perpetrated by the Taliban), Abu-Lughod’s “structural violence” is a matter of human rights, inaccessible to women because they are women. On a similar note, Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan observe, “. . . “culture” is that which affects women while “politics” affects men, and human rights statements do not include those needed by the female majority of humanity” (Steinem and Morgan (1980) 2002, 44). So, do powerful nations, in their political interests and agendas, choose to look upon those rights as (now) in need of rectifying? In other words, after September 11, in the USA’s “war on terror” it evidently became

expedient to use “culture” selectively, choosing to make invisible, for example, the fact that Muslim women may not want to cast off their *burqas*. In its conceptual ambiguity for the West, “culture” may be, and is, manipulated to political and pragmatic ends, subverting the much wider symbolic connotation of the *burqa* or veil as women’s segregated space, to one of subordination and oppression—from which women must be “liberated.” Thus, the rhetoric of women’s “freedom” and “rights” serves to actively *obfuscate* the actual political intent, where the “civilized” (and white) West sets forth to shoulder its “burden,” again.<sup>5</sup> Fighting courageously for women’s rights in a democratic Afghanistan since 1977, RAWA have, says Abu-Lughod, opposed the U.S. bombing of their country, where this will bring not salvation, but more hardship (2002, 789). With similar (but not identical) rhetoric driving the war in Iraq, we await the outcome of that promise in both countries today.

After September 11, several subsequent terrorist attacks in the state of Kashmir and on Parliament in New Delhi were acknowledged by Islamic fundamentalist groups operating out of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir or from within Indian territory itself. The anti-Muslim rhetoric by many Hindus in India reached fever pitch, as I heard it in the summer of 2002 in Kolkata, even among highly educated, middle-class professionals. Rhetoric so often expresses high emotion, and an unthinking reaction to a perception of events. It can be inclusive rather than particular about the group against which it is directed (so, all Muslims). It blinds those subscribing to such rhetoric to the conditions that need redress, at the source. Taking the blinders off in the face of murders by terrorists requires, perhaps, the detachment of someone not directly affected. However, where such rhetoric continues untempered even in the light of the brutal Hindu-Muslim killings in the western state of Gujarat in February 2002—or perhaps, because of this event—it seems doubtful that the root causes for conflict can be effectively addressed in a democratic nation constituted of diverse religions and peoples. The more thoughtful, after September 11, have observed that radical anti-Muslim rhetoric ignores at its peril the political and economic circumstances that give rise to discontent, and presents instead stereotypes that can be hated, and therefore punished.

In India, a secular democracy of a billion people, with majority Hindus, and some 12 percent Muslims, an anti-Muslim rhetoric appears to be

integral to the political agenda, especially of the more extremist elements of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition of political parties currently in power. Despite a Constitution that, in 1950, guaranteed free schooling for all children up to age 14, and 100 percent literacy by 1960, India produces today the highest number of illiterates in the world (PROBE Report 1999; Weiner 1991).<sup>6</sup> While literacy rates for women of all communities vary across the country, even in the state of Kerala (India's internationally recognized success -story on women's literacy), Muslim women show comparatively low literacy rates. Scholarship on Muslim women in India notes the need to place their specially disadvantaged position in the context of a minority community's history in Independent (majority Hindu) India, and its retention of the Shariat or Muslim Personal Law, where especially women lose out from potentially progressive legislation under Indian Civil Law (Saiyed 1992, 5; Mazumdar 1993, 3). It notes the community's backwardness in educating its women, and the inverse relationship between low literacy levels, high fertility, and women's low status (Aziz and Khan 1993; Bhatta 1993; Cleland et al. 1996). Indian social scientists have observed that where minority status is combined with cultural constraints as well as poverty, the road to women's advancement is a steep climb, and this is especially true for impoverished Indian Muslim women (Bhatta 1993, 16; Mazumdar 1993, 3; Saiyed 1992, 5; Siddiqi 1993, vi).

In light of the above, the American "war on terror" has had an ironic and disastrous fall-out far from Afghanistan and Iraq, among Muslims living in a slum (*basti*)<sup>7</sup> community in Southern Kolkata. For the last five summers I have been observing a Muslim, community-based non-governmental organization (NGO), Anwar Ali Education Society (AAES),<sup>8</sup> which works to improve the lives of the *basti* community in this part of the city. My research focus has been, and is, on the NGO's educational programs for adolescent girls. For the past sixteen years an American donor agency, Children's Sponsorship Charity (CSC), has funded around 70 percent of AAES programs. I found in the summer of 2002 that AAES' circumstances were considerably altered. In December 2001, three months after the terrorist attacks in the USA, CSC declared its intention to withdraw by September 31 of 2002. Social workers, deeply upset, observed to me that surely such withdrawal ought to be phased out over a few years for a destitute community, and not on such short notice. As it stood, they said,

they themselves would probably be unemployed soon, while their community would be left without essential programs on which it had come to depend. This, despite facts and figures supporting the NGO's success in providing more schools for the community's girls, greater enrollment numbers, young women going on to college, and improved health statistics for the community in general. Muslim women evidently *were* being "liberated," as defined in terms of their "rights" to an education, good health, and other life choices, largely with American assistance. But this destitute community had much further to go—why were they left stranded mid-stream so soon after September 11 by the CSC? What appears to be the political fallout of September 11 as well as anti-Muslim sentiment in India have left the *basti* community I have been working with in uncertain circumstances, with unfortunate consequences for its advancement in general. My own particular concerns are for its women, those assisted by AAES programs, as well as those who work under its aegis.

While I cannot establish conclusive links between connected events, several pertinent questions have, for me, pointed to tentative but disturbing conclusions. The thrust of this paper comments on the disjuncture between American claims to "liberate" the Muslim woman in its "war on terror," and the actual consequences for "real" people when political agendas underlie such rhetoric—even for private donor agencies working in the developing world. In the account that follows, I describe briefly some of AAES's programs, with a focus on their programs for women; its achievements; my own involvement as a CSC "sponsor" of a young girl in the *basti*; and developments after the events of September 11, 2001.

### AAES and its work

Muslims make up around 85 percent of the population of the *basti* that stretches across southwestern Kolkata, while some 12 percent of its other residents are Hindu, and the rest Christian and Buddhist. This largely migrant population (primarily from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and some from Bangladesh) came in search of work as dock labor at Kolkata Port. However, when the Port declined through the 1960s this population (presently around 800,000 or so) was left without a means of income, and settled in the Port's hinterland with the hope of finding jobs in the City. Today, the *basti* comprises a vast maze of single brick and

plaster rooms joined at the wall, housing families that average around six children each, sharing toilets, on average, with five other families. Open drains breeding malaria and gastric diseases run through this extensive maze. Unemployment, drugs, and alcoholism are endemic to the *basti* population, as are respiratory and malnutrition-related ailments. While most Muslim women of the *basti* rarely work outside their homes, some Hindu women work several part-time jobs as maids in the homes of the middle-class at a monthly salary, from each job, of around \$4.<sup>9</sup> Men, if employed at all, work, for example, in sales at the local market, as rickshaw pullers, as mechanics in refrigerator or car repair shops, or do daily wage labor in construction projects or washing dishes in restaurants. An average monthly income for a family ranges from around \$11 to \$43. More than 90 percent of homes are rented, at an average cost of around \$8 per month.

AAES, which draws its leaders and most of its social workers from this *basti* itself, came into being in 1969 as a night school run by young Muslim men offering basic literacy to the community's children. The AAES was officially registered in 1985 as a non-profit organization, and, in 1986 acquired the collaboration of CSC, which solicits private American donors as sponsors to pay for the educational and health costs of a child in need in different parts of the world. In its work with AAES, such payment was processed through a special unit, the Family Assistance Branch (FAB), which operated with a group of around seventy paid social workers and staff, and was monitored through CSC's national headquarters in India. While CSC's project in this *basti* sought sponsors for upto a maximum of 663 children, the average number of children who had found sponsors over the last four years was approximately 550, some 60 percent of whom were girls, and some 3 percent of whom were Hindus.<sup>10</sup>

The American sponsor provides \$25 per month, of which around one third is kept by CSC for overheads. The FAB reimbursed, on the presentation of receipts, a student's school-related costs (uniforms, fees, and books), at the Municipality-subsidized schools that serve the area.<sup>11</sup> It also assisted with medical costs of the child and her family, for medicines prescribed at the free Health Clinic run by the FAB, or for specialist services at local State-run hospitals. Given the present strength of the U.S. dollar with relation to the Indian rupee, the FAB used the "spill-over" from CSC sponsorship money to also fund, or "subsidize" (CSC's term), besides

the Health Clinic, several Early Care and Childhood Development Centers (ECCDs), offering three-to-five-year-olds, on a Monday through Friday basis, one daily meal, a monthly health and weight evaluation, and activities such as singing and learning rhymes; an Adult Literacy Center; non-formal Home Schools offering primary education (Classes 1–4), and health information for adolescent girls (usually siblings of sponsored children); and one non-formal 3-year Condensed Course covering Classes 5–10. The FAB also ran immunization drives, and “awareness” programs on “Safe Motherhood,” and clean living (Environment Day), when *basti* women are advised, for example, on the dangers of teenage pregnancy, general antenatal care and nutritional needs, and hygienic living. Trained persons (including doctors) from “resource” agencies in the city volunteered to train FAB’s staff, and spoke to the *basti* community on issues such as drug addiction and women’s reproductive health. The CSC was particular that the books were balanced and reports sent in to its Head Office in India at the end of each month, before the money for the next month was remitted to AAES/FAB.

AAES also receives assistance from other foreign donors, Indian charitable organizations like the Rotarians and Lions, private donors, and both Center and State funds. However, its resources are stretched thin, given that it serves, in the four Municipal wards within which it actively operates, a population of around 250,000 people. With these funds (constituting about 30 percent of assistance) AAES funds programs outside the purvey of the FAB, such as a counselling center (as of 2000), a library providing free textbooks for students, a drug rehabilitation program, and blood-donation and eye camps.

While providing many services for an impoverished population, AAES sets its sights on educating the adolescent girl, since it is at this age that *basti* girls (both Hindu and Muslim) drop out of school in large numbers. AAES declares in its mission statement that educating the adolescent Muslim girl is a primary means of advancing, over the long term, a destitute and illiterate community, for a literate woman will have a smaller family, have greater health awareness, and will educate the children she will bear. Its programs are geared toward different types of *basti* families, which vary in degree of both income, as well as conservative views with regard to women.

The reasons for the high dropout rate at puberty for a girl are many. An

adolescent Muslim girl, appearing in public on her way to school, in a crowded community of strangers, risks *badnam* ('bad name' or dishonor), and may be unmarriageable—leaving her impoverished family with a liability for life. It is at puberty that she is drawn back into the home to assist with gender-specific chores (and prepare for marriage), such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and helping with younger siblings. The custom of dowry, originally a Hindu upper-caste custom, and illegal since 1961, is now widely prevalent among impoverished Hindus as well as Muslims. In a survey the FAB social workers conducted on my behalf in 1998, more than 50 percent of one hundred families sampled had paid dowry for their daughters (often at six times the family's monthly income), while 16 percent had taken dowry for their sons. These figures are, I think, not fully representative as other studies on dowry among Indian Muslims have shown a much higher percentage (Jehangir 1991; Menon 1981), and it is very likely that many families will not admit to an illegal custom. To educate a daughter beyond puberty means having to pay a larger dowry for an older girl—an obvious disadvantage for a *basti* family, and a good reason to withdraw their child from school. Girls in the *basti* are not kept around the house too long, however, and given away in "early marriage" by age 15 (also illegally).<sup>12</sup> The "Safe Motherhood" awareness programs that were held periodically by the FAB especially targeted this practice, since such marriages have dire and long-term consequences for the girls' health. Babies are often born within a year, and also many in quick succession (five babies in as many years, between the ages of fifteen and twenty, in one case I personally know of), leaving the teenaged mother anaemic and generally debilitated. Besides CSC sponsorship for children in formal schools serving the *basti* areas, three AAES educational programs target the adolescent girl: the Home School program, the Condensed Course, and *Jyoti* ("Light"). The first two were subsidized by CSC "spill-over" funds (but one currently funded by other means), while the last is sponsored by a private Hindu donor at approximately \$450 a year.

The Home School program, first started in 1992 with four schools, offers non-formal education at the primary level (Classes 1–4), including literacy, vocational training in stitching crafts, and health information to girls ranging in age from around 12 to 15. Also providing non-formal education, the Condensed Course teaches Classes 5–10 in three years, at the end of which the girls can take the State examinations as private

candidates in Urdu or Bengali. Both Home School and Condensed Course syllabi are based on State guidelines for formal schools, and neither includes religious instruction in the Quran. *Jyoti*, started in 1995, offers the top-ranking girls in Class 8 from local formal schools special assistance with English in Sunday classes, as well as financial assistance once these girls go on to college after their Class 10 State-level examinations.

The Home Schools serve the poorest and most conservative of Muslim families, and are taught usually in their own homes by young women who are themselves from the *basti* and who have at least a Class 10-level formal education. After acquiring a “quorum” of ten girls from her immediate neighborhood, the “teacher” approaches the FAB, which then offers her a three-day training in a primary-level syllabus based on State guidelines. She teaches Home School five days a week, three hours a day—with quizzes, assignments, skits, and reports to the FAB—at a salary of around \$6 per month (as of 2002). Despite a nearly 40 percent drop-out rate, this scheme has been relatively successful, since adolescent girls do not have to risk *badnam* by leaving their neighborhoods to walk through the crowded and public lanes of the *basti* to go to co-educational Municipal schools. Instead, they are taught by an “older sister” whom their parents know well, in the safe sanctum of her home.

In Home School sessions that I have attended, several young girls told me that they wanted to go further and complete their education until Grade 10 at least, though they were realistic in their doubts that they would get that far. However, they said, even some literacy would at least get them better husbands, and they would make better wives. The girls of *Jyoti*, already in formal schools and from more progressive, supportive, and (for some) relatively better-off families than those in Home Schools, were ambitious in their declarations to me about “being someone.” They reiterated to me their *shauk*, or “desire,” for an education, “to stand on their own feet.” They wanted to work not in an office, perhaps, since this involved working alongside men, but becoming teachers, an “appropriate” profession in their family’s eyes for Muslim women today. Some, however, spoke of their ambition to be aeronautical engineers, or doctors. I have been unable to talk personally with the larger Condensed Course classes, but a general question to the girls as to whether they liked being in school and did they want to finish the course, elicited smiles and nods. However, the FAB workers informed me that few last the course, but some two or

three girls do manage to take the Class 10 State examinations privately. None, so far, have gone on to college, in the years the program has been in existence.

On the plus side. . . .

Given the size of the population being assisted, its extreme poverty, and not least, the difficult cultural terrain that AAES/FAB have had to negotiate in their agenda for community improvement, the following figures from Annual Reports over 1996 through 2001 suggest, in my view, some success. From nine ECCD centers reported in 1997 (with an average of thirty children in each), the 2000 Report lists eighteen centers. Jyoti grew from seven girls in 1995 to twenty-seven in 2001, and stands at twenty-four girls in 2002. Of these, ten are in college (2002), and two have gone on to study for the Masters Degree in Political Science at Calcutta University. One Jyoti girl has completed her Certificate in Nursing course and is looking for work. The other girls are preparing for the Class Ten State examination in Spring 2003. The Condensed Course program, which, had around thirty-five girls in it in 1998, presently has eighty.

The Home School program increased in number from the first four in 1992, at the inception of the program, to fifteen in 1997, dropped to thirteen in 1998, then to ten in 2000, and currently stands at twelve (2002). It bears mentioning here that AAES had told me, even in 1998, that it wished to expand the Home School program with funds independent of CSC, since it felt that this program served the needs of the *basti*'s especially poor and conservative families. In summer 1999 I applied on AAES' behalf to a non-profit, university-based organization in the USA that funds Indian NGOs' development programs with small grants. I then spoke personally on the Home School program to the members of a branch of the organization. This grant came through in 2002. In anticipation, and on the assurance that fresh funds were available, a number of young *basti* women have come forward to teach, evidently with enough students from their neighborhoods eager to learn. Upon receipt of the first installment of the grant in July 2002 three new Home Schools have been started, with a total of fifteen Home Schools planned by September 2002. I am told that another five schools are planned to open by the end of 2002.

A survey (Swaraj 2000) of two hundred families at the *basti*, under the

category “Educational Status,” shows higher rates of attendance at the (formal) primary, middle, and high school levels for CSC-sponsored children, though actual graduation rates for boys stands at 0.65 percent, and 0.00 percent for girls. Under “illiteracy,” CSC-sponsored families show, for siblings of sponsored children, boys rating at 8.88 percent and girls at 12.64 percent. This compares favorably with non-CSC sponsored families, where boys show a much higher illiteracy rate at 14.23 percent and girls at 18.64 percent. The Survey concludes that girls in general show lower rates of literacy than boys in both CSC and non-CSC-sponsored children, though in general the former shows higher rates of attendance in school than the latter. The Survey attributes the higher dropout rate among non-CSC children to greater poverty and general lack of awareness of the value of education.

Under other categories such as “Health Status,” the Survey consistently shows that in CSC-sponsored families the knowledge of the mother about health, and family planning compares favorably (by 5–10 percent more) with non-CSC families. On the subject of nutrition, however, the former show a 45 percent increase in awareness. Both kinds of families are aware of immunization drives for tuberculosis, diphtheria and polio, and have participated at camps organized by AAES.

An incentive, repeated for me by both the girls in the different educational programs, and by one intelligent and articulate eighteen-year-old girl, Nayla, is the increasing community respect for the literate, educated Muslim woman. In the eyes of the community, not only can she make for a better wife and mother, but she can also give back to her community and contribute to its advancement and dignity. Of three community women who worked for AAES and with whom I have spoken at length, Shahnaz has a Masters degree in Islamic History, and Samiya has a Baccalaureate degree, both achieved as private candidates at Kolkata University. (Nayla also acquired her B.A. degree since I first spoke with her in 1998). These women, in recounting to me their life stories and struggles to get an education, observe that they serve today as role models for the young girls of the *basti* (Samanta 2000). I have seen for myself the immense respect that especially young *basti* girls have for them, and the esteem in which the community holds them, in general. None of these young women benefited by the CSC sponsorship program themselves, but certainly benefited as workers for AAES/FAB in the CSC scheme. Their stories speak of an

education achieved at considerable personal cost, both financial, and in terms of responsibilities to ailing family or younger siblings, of absconding fathers, of pressures to drop out of school, and to marry—but also of rare support from a father, a mother, or even a brother-in-law. However, they also speak of remarkably determined and motivated young women fighting considerable odds. Here, in brief, are their stories.

Shahnaz described to me her initial interest in becoming a doctor, thwarted by her father's retirement, subsequent financial hardship, and then his illness. Her older brothers were unsupportive of the family, but her father's unwavering support for the educational ambitions of his favorite child, and her own high motivation resulted in a Masters degree in Islamic History. Her obvious intelligence and efficiency were noticed at initial jobs, leading to her present position as senior social worker at AAES. She took a stand against dowry, and selected her spouse (then at AAES). They married in 2000, and are now the parents of a son.

Nayla, 18 when I met her in 1998, taught Home School while finishing college (with support from her older brothers and mother). She was eloquent in describing to me her efforts to teach her "younger sisters" in the basti, that her own aspirations to an education, despite many hardships (like an absconding father, a handicapped younger brother, and financial hardship) were an inspiration to them. Indeed, she reminded her students frequently of her own motivations, struggles and achievements. She too took a stand against dowry—she was married without one, though her spouse was selected for her. After her marriage Nayla left for her husband's home in Bombay, where, I am told, her in-laws do not permit her to work.

Samiya's father abandoned the family when she was in Class 4. With a supportive mother, older sister and brother-in-law she completed her Bachelor's degree and found work at AAES in the Sponsor Relations Department, translating sponsored children's letters into English and entering data into computers. She broke off her engagement to a young man, whom she had chosen, when his mother demanded dowry, and made disparaging remarks about her for working in an office with men.

For the community's women in general, social workers, as well as outsiders to the community note its advancement. During a "Safe Motherhood" program in the summer of 1998 I was impressed by the large turnout of *basti* women, both young and old, as well as their confident

participation in that public event. When called upon, some women came up to the microphone to voice their issues—something social workers commented upon as being unheard of even a few years ago, when *basti* Muslims had refused to even allow them (fellow Muslims) into their homes. Generally, while speaking at events such as “Safe Motherhood”, or “Environment Day” to the community’s women, and urging girls to stay in school, to be aware of their health needs, to work toward a future, I have been pleasantly surprised by the intelligent—even feminist—responses from some young girls in the audience. So, in response to my question whether they felt that girls would achieve equality with boys, one young girl retorted sharply that there was far to go. Another girl observed that it was all very well to exhort them to take care during pregnancy when, in the extended families they would have to live with after marriage, the mother-in-law was ignorant on such matters. A third, looking directly at her mother in the audience, asked that parents give their school-going daughters more support at home, at least on par with their brothers. I see girls participating in such events now enact skits on the value of women’s education, recite poetry and sing songs composed by both Hindu and Muslim poets, and evidently, feel a degree of comfort and confidence when appearing in public.

### Salma, my sponsored child

After initial inquiries into AAES’s work in 1997, and the role of CSC in its programs, I went to CSC’s head office in the USA in 1998, and selected to sponsor a girl, Salma, from the community that AAES serves. Interested in assisting and following the educational path of a girl-child—from a personal and a research viewpoint—Salma, then thirteen, seemed to me particularly appropriate from both perspectives. She is the fourth of eight children in her family. Two older sisters, around ages fifteen and sixteen in 1998, who preceded her brother and herself in age, had been pulled out of formal school by grade six, and were assisting their mother with household chores, while the family sought a bridegroom for the oldest girl. At the time, the wage-earning family members included a fifteen-year old brother, who had dropped out of school and was working illegally, being a minor, as an apprentice mechanic at a car-repair shop.<sup>13</sup> The father performed uncertain wage labor at a monthly income of around \$20. In

1998 summer the FAB's social workers escorted me to Salma's clean though sparse one-room home (the shared kitchen and toilet were outside). We sat on the single large bed as I talked to the girl about her educational aspirations, while her mother, in welcome, offered me a cold soda and sweets, at some expense to this family. All requests for my address in the USA and in Kolkata were firmly refused by my escorts, by CSC rules, to prevent personal requests by sponsored families for more money from donors. This limited our conversation to my questions about what Salma liked best at school, and, from them, questions about my aged father in Kolkata (but I could not tell them where he lived), what work I did in the USA, why did I have just the one daughter, and what she was doing. Salma had an atlas at hand, and I showed the family where I lived in the USA. They knew it was very far away, they said.

According to CSC guidelines, child and sponsor must correspond at least once every forty-five days or so. I read with interest, over the years, the original letter from Salma to me in Bengali as well as the required English translation done by the "Sponsor Relations" Department at the FAB office. In answer to my questions, she wrote about her favorite subjects in school, her interest in embroidery and handwork, and her four best friends. I asked how she was doing in school, how was her family, and sometimes added comments on the weather ("it is very cold and there is snow everywhere"), and what my daughter was doing. On occasion, I sent photographs—not of my home (since I felt considerable discomfort at the obvious disparity in wealth between Salma's home and mine), but of myself at a park with my dog, or my family assembled around the Christmas tree (with the gifts hidden from view behind us)—generally pictures of carefully neutral content. On my request, CSC deducted small cash gifts from my credit card for Salma's birthday, and at Christmas, for which she sent me appropriate "thank you" letters. Once every October the FAB sent me Salma's report card, to which I replied appropriately, with encouragement, or with a query about a low grade and what problems she was facing at school.

Salma's older sister's wedding card reached me too late, and I found out about the event only after I met Salma in Kolkata in the summer of 2000. Her father sat silently in a corner of the room during that visit, and I could not quite read the discomfort I sensed in the family. I assumed that they had, like most other *basti* Muslims, paid some dowry to the groom, and

were in especially difficult financial straits—but I could not ask this delicate question, or even if I did, expect a truthful answer, since dowry is an illegal practice. Offering money directly to the family was not an option, since cash was not approved by CSC rules, so I sent some money after I returned to the USA through official channels as a wedding gift for Salma's sister. In the following summer of 2001, in a story common to the lives of young girls in the *basti*, I was informed by the FAB workers that Salma's sister had delivered a stillborn child within a year of her marriage. She had been cast out by her in-laws and husband, and was now again with her parents. That year, due to my own poor health, I was able to meet Salma but once, briefly, at the FAB office. And in the first such letter from her after I returned to the USA, I was touched by her expression of regret that she had not been able to speak what was “in her heart” when we had met so briefly. This is the only letter over the years that offered more than general information about her life in school and at home—it contained a plea. I re-read that line—in both the Bengali and English versions of her letter—though much more emotionally expressed in the former—and regretted the constraints on donor-recipient relations that were built in by CSC rules. I replied that we would certainly speak when we met the following year. I had talked with other “sponsored” girls at the *basti*, and knew of the many forces that worked against their pursuing their education beyond Class 8—financial, and (a related matter), the pressure to drop out of school and to marry. I wondered whether Salma wanted to tell me about these pressures on her, and if she was seeking my support. We continued to correspond, again in carefully censored and monitored letters from her, and my own bland letters in response, expressing interest and concern for the child and her family but saying little more of substance.

## After September 11

Immediately after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, I received concerned e-mails from social workers at AAES, as well as its Secretary asking about my welfare and that of my family. I replied saying that we lived at some distance from the attacks, though the nation itself was in a state of shock and grief. In December 2001 CSC declared its intentions of phasing out its support for AAES—I learned of this in a despairing and private e-mail from a social worker at

the FAB in February 2002. Soon after September 11 India declared its support for the USA in the “war on terror,” and in October 2001 the USA launched its military campaign in Afghanistan, driving the Taliban from power. Several terrorist attacks perpetrated (and claimed) by Islamic fundamentalists in the state of Kashmir following September 11, an attack in December 2001 on the Indian Parliament in Delhi, and, in January 2002, the gunning down of five Indian policemen guarding the American library in Kolkata, resulted in the loss of many lives—of terrorists, security personnel, paramilitary forces, policemen, and civilians. Then, in February 2002, after Muslims burned alive at Godhra railway station in Gujarat state some fifty-eight Hindu *kar sevaks*, radical elements of the BJP party, and Hindus in that state retaliated with the brutal slaughter, over three days, of nearly a thousand Muslims, it was my turn to email my friends at AAES asking if that largely Muslim part of Kolkata was calm, and if they were safe.

I received no response to my question, nor did I hear any further about CSC’s withdrawal until I met the social workers in person, in Kolkata in May 2002. At this time India and Pakistan were confronting each other across the borders between the two countries on the terrorism and Kashmir issues. A million soldiers faced off, as politicians threatened the use of their respective nuclear arsenals, and the media estimated the possible number of deaths should this come to pass. The USA and the international community scrambled to diffuse the situation while also with difficulty attempting to define the various “terrorisms” at issue for the USA, for Pakistan, and for India. Various highly placed American diplomats visited the subcontinent in June, asking India to back down. They also held Pakistan to account for harboring the “militants” who were crossing into Indian territory—a rather tentative holding to account, in the Indian view, since the USA needed Pakistan’s assistance with its own war across the Afghanistan border.

In this context of high tension and general anti-Muslim sentiment in India in the summer of 2002 I entered, with considerable trepidation, the crowded and narrow streets of the *basti*. I was obviously recognizable as a Hindu woman, despite the *salwar-kameez* I always wear, with *dupatta* (scarf) carefully draped across my chest, in the style of the women social workers of AAES. I found the FAB head office unusually empty of people, and darker (in the daytime), since lights were switched off, than I remembered it from the year before. The workers informed me, at this time, and to my

consternation, that CSC, while officially declaring that it would phase out its support (thus, over a few years)—had now, suddenly, by word of mouth and not (yet) in writing, informed AAES that it would withdraw forthwith as of September 31, 2002. I heard that several workers had already been laid off in anticipation of CSC's withdrawal, and indeed, did not see many I had seen the year before. In an already depressed job market, especially in an unremunerative area such as Social Work, they asked where could they find work at such short notice. The Project Manager at the FAB, a Hindu, who had come to this position from another city in order to be nearer his ailing father, gave me his card, with a request for help in finding work. Where does this leave the sponsored children, I asked. Who pays for them to continue in school?

The social workers told me that they were now in the difficult situation of having to refuse certain services to sponsored children and their families, without being able to provide adequate explanation about why they were having to do so. After some sixteen years of CSC support, a sudden cessation of assistance was, understandably, causing rumblings in the *basti* community—but the workers' hands were tied. As one worker observed to me, how could CSC justify abruptly shutting down a long-term project involving assistance for an especially destitute and conservative community? Did it not take into account at what point such a project had begun its efforts, the immensity of the problems at hand at that time? I was also told that soon after the "war on terror" had been declared, and after the USA had called for world-wide action against terrorists, Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code was declared in the Municipal wards where AAES operates, forbidding, by law, public congregation. Indian police, I was told, had arrested some young Muslim men on terrorism charges. I asked some senior social workers bluntly if CSC's abrupt withdrawal could be attributed to the fact that AAES was a Muslim NGO, working in a Muslim community. They looked away from me, with downcast eyes, and said, quietly and with hesitation, that it was possible. They implied that they would not discuss the matter further. Their silence, as I read it, spoke volumes for an experience of poverty, minority status, and struggle that I—an upper caste and upper class Hindu—could not begin to share.

I e-mailed CSC in the USA, asking for an explanation of their withdrawal from AAES. An e-mail in reply directed me to inquire at CSC's head office in South India. Before I could do so, however, and within a few days, CSC

India e-mailed me themselves with the brief information that it had supported AAES for sixteen years, and was now withdrawing because the Project had been inefficiently managed. I replied in a sentence, and with some anger, that I would cancel my credit card payment when they pulled out.

However, it bears mentioning that over the years I had heard several complaints from social workers not only about their long work hours and low pay (less than CSC requirements), but also about the gap between the vision of the community leaders who inspired and drove such a project, and the execution of that vision in real terms. There was, for example, a now-fired Project Manager who did not “go to the field” to check on *basti* conditions for himself. A Hindu social worker, in one Family Health session I attended, advised women of the benefits of a small family, and of tubal ligation procedures, since men might, and did, refuse to wear condoms. A woman could not go to heaven if she had had this procedure, said one woman. To this the social worker replied that it would not matter since she would be dead anyway! The woman in question replied courteously that she could not go against her beliefs. The subject was dropped, and this impasse remained unresolved, at least at the time. I kept my private views on this social worker’s ignorance and arrogance to myself. In 2000 I found workers at the FAB worried because a large sum of CSC donation money was sitting in the bank and not being allocated with the promptness CSC expected—and CSC was threatening to take it back. (This situation was expedited and resolved). Indeed, given a large population within which the AAES/FAB work, it is a fact that these community-based workers lack general managerial skills for dealing with a poor and conservative community, despite periodic training programs offered by CSC. The charge of “inefficient management” is, thus, in my view, undeniable. It is also, in my view, built into the kind of problems that AAES deals with.

In the sequence of events, within very few days of my initial e-mail to the CSC offices in the USA, an official from CSC India showed up at the AAES office in Kolkata, and, in the words of the social workers, practically forced the Project’s agreement writing that it agreed to the CSC pull-out. My friends speculated that possibly my e-mail to the USA had prompted such quick action on CSC’s part. We had no way of knowing this for a fact, of course.

In the summer of 2002, as always, I brought a gift of costume jewelry for Salma, who told me with sorrow that she had failed Class 9 due to illness,

she “didn’t know what had happened, she *had* studied, even the friends she had helped with their studies had passed the exams, but she hadn’t” –and would have to repeat the year. I learned nothing more, probably because her mother stood beside her. However, she told me, with enthusiasm, that she had joined the National Cadet Corps (similar to the Army Reserves in the USA), where she would learn to ride horses, use guns, and wear uniforms. She argued heartily with the FAB workers when they tried to dissuade her from this venture, on the grounds that it would detract from her school performance, and, moreover, held no future for a Muslim girl of her family background. I supported the girl, on condition that she didn’t neglect her studies, and we left it there. When I met her again, just before I left for the USA, she was pursuing her interests in the NCC, and preparing for another year of Class Nine.

When I returned at the end of July to the USA, I found a long form letter from CSC, dated July 2002, waiting for me. It thanked me for my support for Salma over the years and informed me that CSC was ending its affiliation with AAES by October 2002 because of AAES’ “administrative difficulties,” and that although CSC had identified problems and attempted to assist AAES, the latter had not resolved its difficulties. CSC could not, thus, “in good conscience continue assistance to the project.” The letter then listed the services provided with CSC assistance to AAES over the sixteen years, and in fairness, I offer the figures as they cite these in the letter: 7,000 children given a head start in their education through the ECCD program; 2,000 children who had, because of CSC sponsorship, stayed on in school and completed middle school; 200 children who had completed high school; the promotion of Home Schools and the Condensed Course for adolescent girls. In the area of health a community clinic and a reproductive and child health clinic had been organized, along with a health awareness program in local schools; 1,000 children who had completed vocational training and were now self-employed, while 82 girls had received nursing training in association with St. John Ambulance Association.

In conclusion, I was thanked for the start in life that my sponsorship had given Salma, and that CSC assistance would now be targeted toward other “struggling communities” in India. Finally, when CSC left AAES in October I would be introduced to “the special youngster” who would be “selected” for my consideration, since I would no longer be sponsoring Salma. I called the CSC head office in the USA and informed them that I was canceling my sponsorship.

In answer to my question, what has the CSC withdrawal meant for AAES, a September 2002 e-mail from Shahnaz informed me that most of the CSC-supported ECCD centers would be discontinued at the end of the month, though a few would continue by charging students monthly fees.<sup>14</sup> Canceling such “awareness” programs as Safe Motherhood, HIV/AIDS, Malnutrition Prevention Camp, Family Education, Reproductive and Child Health programs, the Detection and Prevention of Developmental Disabilities, she continued,

will effect directly on the living standard of Bustee people. Because Women won't get access health facilities free of cost. Secondly their living standard will be rampaged [sic] due to low income of family. Adolescent Girls will be deprived to acquire adequate knowledge on Family Life Education.

The same e-mail noted that nine field workers had lost their jobs as of April 2002. The jobs of nineteen social workers, including that of the writer, would end in September 2002—they had already received termination letters. The e-mail ended on a small ray of hope, however, as an Area manager for CSC, India, had agreed to meet with AAES in October 2002 in order to discuss the possibility of extending the project for three more months with limited staff. For this CSC India was waiting to get permission from their American headquarters. Even as I worked on this paper another e-mail informed me that there was silence from CSC India, that the extension was obviously not coming through, and that Shahnaz and her husband (the parents of a one-year old child) were in danger of losing their jobs with AAES. A subsequent e-mail informed me that both were working at half-pay. The latest e-mail (March 2003) informs me that Shahnaz's husband is now out of work. As I write, Samiya too is out of work, but making ends meet by working at assisting a relative at his business, and selling life insurance.

Other developments and incidents of note that appear also to pertain to the fallout of September 11 and the terrorist attacks in India—though I know little more about them than what I was told—are that the Hindu sponsor of the Jyoti program has, without explanation, refused to make an appearance. AAES's Secretary personally observed to me, “the person who always stood beside me is suddenly no longer there.” Since the Jyoti program continues, I am assuming that this sponsor has not pulled out his financial assistance. And, curiously, three grant checks for the Home

School program from the USA failed to arrive at the AAES's office, though they have had no problem receiving other mail. The fourth, sent to another address entirely in Kolkata, and picked up by hand—finally has reached AAES.

I have, with the withdrawal of CSC, no institutional means of paying for Salma's education after September 2002. After the form letter, I received a phone call from the CSC head office, since "I had been e-mailing people there." I realized quickly that the person asked to speak with me would offer little by way of answers, and that this appeared to be an attempt at damage control, given that I, a sponsor, was asking questions. I asked rather briskly how I could finance Salma's education until at least Class 10. (Leaving her with cash in hand, as I could have done when I met her this year, is not feasible, since the money would almost certainly have gone to meet the needs of a large and poor family, and not been used for Salma's school costs). I received no reply to my query. In the meantime, I sent a much larger cash gift than I usually send, while CSC was still in place, with special instructions that the money be spent on "school costs" alone. I told AAES social workers that I would not agree to be "transferred" to another child, since this raised ethical questions for me. Since I made my concerns about Salma clear while I was in Kolkata, I have been assured in a recent e-mail by the Secretary of AAES that sponsored children, including Salma, will be "looked after" with regard to her schooling, as will her two older sisters in Home Schools, and that "details would be sent" to me. While his intention is creditable, I will wait to see how he will accomplish such a task, and from where he will get the funds to put some 550 children through formal school now that CSC funding has been withdrawn.

### In conclusion, some ironies . . .

#### a)The sponsor-child relationship

In conclusion, several questions come to mind. First, how may we understand the collaboration—as relationship—between charitable, voluntary agencies like CSC and homegrown, community-based organizations like AAES? CSC is not, as I see it, implementing development programs so much as focusing on one aspect of a community's needs, and assisting particular and related programs. So, CSC uses the money of donors to fund the school and health needs of children in the community AAES serves—

with the NGO then using the “spill-over” of funds for other programs. What has been problematic is the disjuncture, after 9/11, between CSC’s claims to assist poor children in a Muslim community, and its sudden withdrawal.

CSC’s telethons in the USA, as it seeks sponsors for children across the world, almost always portray the appealing face of a child, usually of color, against a background of poverty. As an 800-telephone number appears on the television screen, the (unseen) speaker appeals to the charity of the potential donor, to make a difference in the life of an impoverished child. Newsletters that I, as a sponsor, received, offered “sponsor news” where such a person travels to see “his” or “her” child, then writes about the circumstances in which the child and her family live: “The father . . . cuts rock out of the earth for a living, often working in 119 [degree] heat. D—’s sponsorship dollars doubled the father’s income.” Or, again, “the family of five lived in two rooms smaller than the average American bathroom.” The thrust, however, of such personal stories is on the joy and gratitude with which sponsors are received, how the children fall asleep in their arms, and in general, the warmth of that encounter for the sponsor. If the child benefits by her love and money, the sponsor reaps her rewards in the child’s gratitude and love for her. Mailed requests for funding emphasize the power of love in the life of a child: “you can help change the life of a girl or boy who needs a caring person like you to give them a brighter tomorrow.”

In the light of fund-raising campaigns that highlight the themes of love and generosity on the part of the sponsor, and the life-long bond between sponsor and child, what I found “on the ground” was complex. On the one hand, as I have described above, the money that reached the AAES through CSC undoubtedly had, over years, concrete and positive results for a poor community. The voluntary donation by an American to a child far away did pay for her school and health costs. It also helped her family with their medical needs, and helped siblings with non-formal education, while the “spill-over” helped to fund other programs for the community at large. I also found that since CSC does not limit sponsors to the required monthly amount of around \$25, some sponsors would, I was told by AAES, send checks of several hundred dollars to their child (possibly out of generosity, but perhaps also as a tax write-off). Translated to rupees, this amounted to princely amounts for a *basti* family, causing rifts with much poorer neigh-

bors, and angry queries to FAB workers from other sponsored families that did not receive such bounty why they were being left out—or, were FAB workers simply keeping their money from them? Where such monetary assistance should, at best, help members of a community become self-sustaining, such excessive generosity also resulted in families giving up on working altogether and becoming dependent on sponsorship money.

Reciprocal feelings of love and gratitude on the part of the child to its sponsor were also actively encouraged by the workers at especially FAB, which was directly responsible for managing the CSC funds and allocating these to the sponsored children. However, when I, a sponsor, have requested a meeting with “my” child, at any time, I was either escorted to her home by social workers—if this was where I want to meet her—or met her at the FAB office in their presence, never by myself. These people carefully protected me from any real contact with the child and her family—cutting off requests for personal addresses, for example. The children’s letters, as I have said earlier, were monitored and censored so that the sponsor was not faced by demands that might have put her off. As the FAB workers told me often, the donation is voluntary, and the sponsor can choose to withdraw her money if offended by excessive demands. This makes for a rather strained meeting, in my own experience, every time. This is especially so because the child has, I have seen, an image of the “sponsor” not only as benefactor but also as ultimate recourse in the face of the many obstacles she faces. She lives in circumstances where the sponsor offers hope for a better future, on the one hand—and many factors that can dash that hope swiftly, on the other. For example, one sponsored girl declared passionately to me that she would write to her sponsor about the pressures her families were bringing to bear on her. She desperately wanted to stay in school, since she saw education as the only way out of her life cleaning and washing clothes in middle-class homes. (She failed in this, and was married off by her family within a year of her declaration to me). I recall having attended, in 1998, a Sunday morning program where sponsored children learned songs and dances. They performed these for me, and I was surprised to hear, included within traditional and popular songs, and composed paeans to “the Sponsor” and how wonderful he or she was in the life of the child. I realized in what high esteem the *basti*’s children, and their families held their American sponsor.

Children, some around five years old, and young teenaged boys flocked around me, in my own high status as “Sponsor,” and in answer to my questions, declared their dreams of further education and a future full of hope and opportunity. I noted at the time in my journal how touched I had been by that hope, the innocence and trust with which it had been expressed by these children, and how unselfconsciously even the older boys had sung their songs for me.

How exactly is the relationship between sponsor and child defined by CSC, if on the one hand its brochures and telethons highlight a charitable “my child” motif, even a life-long bond? Is the child, once given a “start,” then abandoned when CSC re-directs its efforts to another project, other children? What are the consequences of such abandonment? A request for funds in a letter, dated late in 2002—after CSC had withdrawn from AAES—highlights the irony. Its opening sentence asks:

Have you ever looked into the eyes of your child and wondered about what the future holds? What college would be chosen? . . . Now, think about what your child’s life might be like if he or she couldn’t read or write . . . think of how severely limited opportunities would be for your child. . . . The lack of education feeds the cycle of poverty and breeds poor health, crime, and ultimately the destruction of communities. With education, children have a chance to break the cycle of poverty, have a brighter future and become productive, contributing members of their communities.

It was sobering, when asked to offer motivational words to Condensed Course students in the summer of 2002, to look upon the bright, hopeful faces of the young girls, and to know what obstacles lay ahead of them—in their desire for an education, and a better life—even in the 21st century, and in a secular democracy. I reflected that those of us more socially and economically privileged have rarely had occasion to doubt that we would have opportunities and choices, to *hope* for better always. The generosity of a distant stranger, an American, had indeed given the children of the *basti* hope—I had seen the promises of the telethon campaigns actually at work. Yet, when so easily lost in the wake of world events, how precious is hope, I thought, as I watched it slip from the grasp of so many children dreaming of a better future than the one they had.

b) “Liberating” Muslim women

In the years I have been observing a home-grown, community-based organization like AAES at work, one that recognizes the realities on the ground that it must negotiate to be effective, my own conclusions as to its relative success, to date, suggest that it molds those realities both to safeguard cultural beliefs and traditional norms, while also firmly encouraging change. Such success is quantifiable up to a point, in terms of numbers of children given a start in life, of numbers of children immunized, of more girls in schools, both formal and non-formal. (However, given the size of the population, I have found it difficult to get consistent figures on programs, where Annual Reports may list one set of figures, while a social worker may offer another). The qualitative changes are, I think, less difficult to assess, and one may observe, over years, such change through women’s greater attendance at awareness meetings, their willingness to speak in public, and the critical comments of young girls against the constraints they face in getting an education.

Perhaps the women social workers of the NGO best exemplify the model by which AAES operates. In their *salwar-kameezes*, with *dupatta* draped over their chests, (or heads, in the vicinity of the mosque), soft-spoken yet firm, contained in movement and demeanor, they are Muslim girls themselves, from the *basti*. It is their subtle negotiation of tradition and modernity that, in my view, places these young women in such high regard in the *basti*. They do not, indeed cannot, espouse radical change, for this would be counter-productive in a conservative community. Yet they work persistently to effect change, and need to be understood within new opportunities and possibilities, and thus, changing definitions of the gendered self in contemporary India. Traditional norms are renegotiated in terms of what is possible for a Muslim girl from the *basti* today, pushing at certain boundaries but retaining others, accounting for their status as role models for other young girls.

Shahnaz, Nayla, and Samiya are women who have achieved, through their high level of motivation and courage, some degree of autonomy—or “liberation.” Indeed, in a context of poverty, such autonomy might be seen as a matter of necessity—they needed to work, to contribute to family and for their own needs (such as paying for special tutorial assistance before examinations). They pushed the boundaries of *purdah*<sup>15</sup> as segregation, as they went to college, then to work, where the latter requires working with

men, and walking the public and crowded *basti* lanes. *Purdah*, asserted one woman to me, is “inside” oneself. I interpret this to mean that modesty, a central dimension of *purdah*, is felt within oneself, something a woman is responsible for, and not a quality that may be imposed upon her. Appearing in public, without the *burqa*, does not necessarily, then, threaten this crucial tenet for Muslim women—in this interpretation. So, all three women successfully protested the insult of dowry, and made certain life choices—about education, work, choosing a spouse, breaking an engagement. In other words, each exhibited some degree of *agency* in the circumstances of their lives. They defy—today—a conservative community’s criticism of their untraditional roles. At the same time, most of the community holds them in high esteem for exemplifying what is possible for other *basti* girls. In my observations over the years, I doubt that AAES would be as effective without these young women as its leaders and role models. Given what Patricia Hill Collins calls “multiple systems of oppression” (1993), in this context those of *purdah*, dowry, and poverty, we can argue that these young *basti* women have *negotiated* the oppressive institutions of patriarchy to advantage, and furthered the ends of liberation and autonomy within those parameters available to them (See also Raheja and Gold 1994; Jeffrey and Jeffrey 1994). Current development strategies have moved from early “welfare” models where Third World women were seen to “need” handouts of food, and nutritional counseling, to one of women’s “empowerment” (Ward 2003, 239). But through self-motivation and determination, some young women of the *basti* have empowered themselves, and now empower others of their community. What is the irony, then, that a rhetoric of liberation is applied only selectively to some Muslim women in the world but withdrawn from others—when these women had actually achieved some degree of “liberation” and were inspiring other women toward that goal? When American assistance was in fact addressing the issue of their (human) rights to get an education, to work, to better health?

It is in the light of what I have personally heard from my friends at AAES, and what I have observed of AAES’s efforts in the *basti* over the last five summers that I have been moved to write this paper, and to ask the questions with which I now conclude. Why, almost immediately after September 11, did CSC suddenly decide to withdraw its sponsorship for AAES, on which a large and destitute Muslim community depended, and

with barely a few months' notice? Why has the Hindu sponsor of Jyoti been unforthcoming? Why are checks sent from the USA to a Muslim NGO missing? These are questions to which I can only surmise at answers, only attempt at drawing connections between recent world events and their fallout for the people of *one* Muslim *basti* in Kolkata. I may reasonably ask, I think, why AAES was allowed, over years, to go its "inefficient" way without more stringent CSC guidelines. Why didn't CSC declare its tenure (say, fifteen years of assistance) at the start? Then AAES would have prepared for its pull-out, with less devastating consequences for the community. Is it enough to give a child "a start in life" and leave her with broken dreams, mid-stream, after holding out that promise? Where a community's leaders, with vision, focus on assisting its women to take its people forward, on what grounds can such an abrupt pull-out of assistance—of American charity—be justified?

Where American charitable assistance for programs in the developing world appear to be at the mercy of political agendas, what are the chances that an ill-defined "war on terror"—where nations collude—will overlook the desperation born of destitution of people whom nations claim as citizens, while simultaneously denying them their rights? I think that I may reasonably conclude that such a "war on terror" that is blind to the *causes* of a people's discontent, but that, ironically, vaunts "women's advancement" as one of its goals, is doomed, in the long run, to fail on all counts. When I left the Kolkata *basti* at the end of the summer of 2002, the sounds and sights of despair and discontent were audible, and visible.<sup>16</sup>

#### NOTES

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia, for Faculty Development Grants, which funded three summer research projects in Kolkata over 1998–2000. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers at Meridians whose comments helped to give final shape to my paper.

1. Previously "Calcutta," in the state of West Bengal in eastern India.
2. *Time Magazine*. 2001. December 3.
3. *Roanoke Times*. 2003, March 9
4. American students I teach are frequently taken aback when I point out that high rates of rape in the USA may be premised in ideas about gender in this culture. Likewise, more "exotic" types of violence against women, such as Female Genital Mutilation, or dowry murders need to be understood in terms of different cultural premises. However, I find repeatedly that the latter kinds are highlighted in their responses, usually preceded by "In these cultures . . ."

5. “. . . we need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical and political narratives . . . : (Abu-Lughod 2002, 758)
6. The Public Report on Basic Education in India (PROBE) observes that India’s success with higher education obscures the fact that by the 1991 Census, one-third of all children ages 6–14 years (23 million boys and 36 millions girls) were out of school; that less than 30 percent of adults had completed eight years of schooling; and that half the country’s population (61 percent women, and 36 percent men, aged seven and above) were illiterate. Female literacy rates were lower in the country as a whole even than sub-Saharan Africa (PROBE 1999:9)
7. A *basti* is more accurately an “unplanned development” in an urban area, less pejorative than “slum,” and the term preferred by *basti*-dwellers.
8. The names of organizations and individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.
9. In 2002 the exchange rate stood at around \$1 to Rupees 50.
10. A comparative survey of CSC and non-CSC-sponsored families under AAES conducted in 2000 lists the former at 617 children over the age of 6 years, 304 males (49 percent), and 313 females (51 percent).
11. Given a large segment of Urdu speakers in the *basti*, only 20 Urdu-medium primary-level Municipal schools, and one Secondary school serve the 800,000 population of the total *basti* area in this part of Kolkata. Besides the two AAES-run Urdu-medium schools at primary and middle school levels, five other privately run Urdu schools offer education at the secondary level. While not expensive by middle-class standards, these cost more than the Municipal schools, and are beyond the means of most *basti* people. Also, while the private schools offer different timings for boys and for girls, the municipal schools are co-educational, which deter many *basti* families from sending their adolescent daughters there.
12. Indian law requires a girl to be eighteen when she marries.
13. The dropout rate for boys in the *basti* stands at around 40 percent. In the cases I know, the cause is generally an economic one, where the young boys are sent to work as apprentice mechanics and assistants in local car repair or refrigeration shops, or in retail
14. I do not know what these fees will be. I do know from talking with *basti* women interested in putting their children in ECCD centers that even a nominal amount may be unaffordable for the child’s family.
15. Literally a “curtain,” *purdah* is the Urdu term used for “veiling” among the *basti* inhabitants. The term suggests the segregated social space women occupy, limitations on mobility in public spaces, as well as modesty in demeanor, speech, and dress (including but not necessarily enforcing the *burqa*).
16. I was unable to meet Salma when I visited Kolkata in the summer of 2003. However, Shahnaz informed me that AAES had dismissed most of the social workers I had known, and that she herself was working full-time at half pay.

The FAB office stood empty, she told me. However, she reassured me that the money I had sent in 2002 for Salma had been used to purchase texts that would be used through Class X as well. Since the CSC pull-out I have not heard from Salma again. What especially disturbed me, however, was that Shahnaz had been asked to organize a workshop to exhort, now, young girls on the need for purdah. I assume that this is a consequence of AAES being funded by conservative interests. Shahnaz was angry and resentful about this turn of events.

#### WORKS CITED

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104 (3) :783–90.
- Aziz, A. and Firoz Khan. 1993. "Fertility as a Function of Education and Economic Status among Muslim Women in Aligarh" In *Muslim Women. Problems and Prospects*, edited by Zakia Siddiqi and Anwar Jahan Zuberi, 77–85. New Delhi: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Bhatty, Zarina. 1993. "Socio-economic Status of Muslim Women." In Zakia A. Siddiqi and Anwar Jahan Zuberi, eds., *Muslim Women. Problems and Prospects*, New Delhi: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd., 11–18.
- Cleland, John, Nashid Kamal and Andrew Sloggett. 1996. "Links between Fertility Regulation and the Schooling and Autonomy of Women in Bangladesh." In *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy, and Fertility Change in South Asia*, ed. Roger Jefferey and Amrita Basu, 205–17. New Delhi: Sage.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2001. "Towards a New Vision." In ed. Janet Lee and Susan M. Shaw, *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, 57–65. Boston, Mass.: McGraw Hill.
- Jeffery, Patricia, and Roger Jeffery. 1994. "Killing my Heart's Desire: Education and Female Autonomy in Rural North India." In *Women as Subjects. South Asian Histories*, ed. Nita Kumar, 125–71. Charlottesville, Va: University of Virginia Press.
- Jehangir, K.N. 1991. *Muslim Women in West Bengal. Socio-economic and Political Status*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates (Publications) Pvt. Ltd.
- Lazreg, Marnia. 1994. *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*. New York: Routledge.
- Mazumdar, Vina. 1993. Introduction to Siddiqi and Zuberi, Siddiqi, Zakia A., and Anwar Jahan Zuberi, eds. 1993. *Muslim Women. Problems and Prospects*. New Delhi: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd. , 1–6.
- Menon, Indu. 1981. *Status of Muslim Women in India. A Case Study of Kerala*. New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House.
- Public Report on Basic Education in India [PROBE]. 1999. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Raheja, Gloria, and Ann Gold. 1994. *Listen to the Heron's Words. Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Saiyed, A.R. 1992. "Muslim Women in India: an Overview." In *Muslim Women in India*, ed. Mohini Anjum, 1–8. New Delhi: Radiant Publishers.

- Samanta, Suchitra. 2000. "Education and 'Autonomy': Muslim Women as Effective Role Models in a Calcutta Slum Community." Paper read at American Association of University Women Biennial Symposium, *International Perspectives: The Political, Social, and Economic Impact of Education on Women and Girls*, November 17–18 in Washington, D.C.
- Siddiqi, Zakia A., and Anwar Jahan Zuberi, eds. 1993. *Muslim Women. Problems and Prospects*. New Delhi: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Steinem, Gloria, and Robin Morgan. 1980/2002. "Female Genital Mutilation. Fighting for Human Rights One Girl at a Time." *Ms. Magazine* (spring): 42–44.
- Swaraj. 2000. A Comparative Study Report between [CSC] and Non-[CSC] enrolled families of [Anwar Ali Educational Society]. Calcutta
- U.S. Government. 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117>
- Ward, Martha C. 2003. *A World Full of Women*. 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Weiner, Myron. 1991. *The Child and the State in India. Child Labor and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.