

Assume I've fallen into a ditch. The intellectuals can argue about it, you can hold an All-India seminar. Someone will say, he's fallen into a ditch because he's not walking carefully enough, someone will say, he's fallen into a ditch because he was pushed in there, someone will say, George Bush has to do something about it. My approach would be: first of all, let me get out of the ditch."

About 30 years ago, Ahmad Rashid Shervani put this approach into practice. It all began when he read a report that pointed to the number of Muslims who held posts in government services – just about two percent. He was shocked and furious. He felt India's Muslims were being denied their due. He wrote ardent articles on this topic, which were published in more than 50 Urdu newspapers, kindling heated discussions. He seems to have inherited his fighting spirit from his family elders. Mr Shervani belongs to a family of fervent Congress Party supporters. He says: "My elders staunchly opposed communalism, fanaticism, the Partition of India, and valiantly fought for freedom. The Shervanis stood firm against communal and separatist Muslims. Why? Because we had faith in India, in the Congress Party, in Gandhiji and in Jawaharlalji. We believed that we, the Indian Muslims, belong to India and that India belongs to us."

His enormous media campaign in the Urdu press couldn't be ignored;

"If the percentage of graduate Muslims was so low, how could one expect a higher proportion of them to be employed in the government services?"

Going Beyond the Blame Game

Crusaders for Enhancing Education among Muslims

A Profile of Ahmad Rashid Shervani

This article is based on an interview with the Shervanis by Kristina Bellach, Indrani and Divya. The text has been written by Kristina Bellach & Madhu Purnima Kishwar



Amina and Ahmad Rashid Shervani

his voice was given a good hearing. He finally received a call from Indira Gandhi, offering to meet with him. At the meeting, she insisted, "You are ignoring the main reason for the low percent of Muslims in government service." "What main reason," Mr Shervani replied, "can there be except that Muslims are discriminated against, cheated of their due share in government employment, and all this under the garb of what is called secularism?"

Mrs Gandhi was calm. "You have a right to blame us, but not entirely," she said, "the main reason they are not getting their share is that Muslims are badly lagging behind in education."

Shervani at first felt that Muslims were being unfairly blamed, and was suspicious of the accuracy of her data and conclusion. She then presented more details about how very few Muslims obtained educational degrees and explained: "You see only the effects of the educational backwardness of Muslims and get upset about it. I understand your being upset. I am also upset. But why do you ignore the cause? Unless and until the cause is removed, the malady cannot be cured."

Mr Shervani still could not believe it. But then Mrs Gandhi handed over some documents to him about education among Muslims. The facts revealed in the documents spoke for themselves. The average proportion of Muslims graduating was roughly between one and two percent. If the percentage of graduate Muslims was so low, how could one expect a higher proportion of them to be employed in the government services?

The next question opened up immediately: how many Muslims were taking their Class X and XII Board examinations? Visiting the Central Board of Secondary Education office the next day, Mr Shervani made another discovery: The exam records for Delhi schools listed approximately 70,000 students who had appeared for their Class X Board exams. Out of this number, there were only a meagre 1,200

Muslims (1.7%). The percentage of Muslims in Delhi was about 8.5 percent at that time.

While collecting the data from these schools, something struck Mr Shervani; from 1947, for the first few years after Partition, the proportion of Muslims taking their Board exams remained at the same level, but then it started to decrease. At first, Muslims fell only slightly behind the rest of the Indian population in taking the Class X Board exams, from 13 percent to 10 percent. Mr Shervani reviewed the national data and concluded that: “Whereas the number of pupils taking their Board exams doubled 10 years after Partition, the number of Muslims taking them remained the same. Therefore, the proportion of Muslims fell from 10 percent to only 5 percent. In the second decade, the total taking the exams increased to about 1.4 million. The number of Muslims increased marginally to about 42,000, just about 3 percent of the total. In the third decade, the total crossed 2 million but Muslims were still behind at about 50,000, just about 2.5 percent of the total. This was the position when I became aware of this problem.”

Today, Mr Shervani and his family can look back on 30 years of persistent efforts to improve the educational achievements of Muslims. Amina Shervani recounted their many decades of work: “We started in 1976. Our job was not only to collect data from schools. We took action every year on the data we assembled. It was an attempt to combine research and solutions.”

“The schools we’re talking about are schools within the system, either government-managed or privately run. The talk of ‘Muslim schools’ is a misnomer. Actually, what we mean by Muslim schools is that there is mainly Muslim membership on the management committee, the president



At a prize giving function in the late 1970's

and secretary are Muslim, but these are run like any other school. There are usually many non-Muslims on the managing committees — Hindus, Christians and others.”

Shervanis were advised by well wishers that they would do better to encourage Muslims to take up vocational education from an early age instead of concentrating on helping them pass their Class XII exams, as the former could improve their employment prospects. Amina Shervani explains why they have chosen their strategy: “Until they clear high school, we cannot even move them towards becoming good plumbers or electricians. High school certificates are needed for all types of employment these days; it is the basis for eligibility. We cannot even think about other forms of training until every Indian has finished high school.”

Their single-minded focus on encouraging the spread of education is totally bereft of sentimental moralism

Their single-minded focus on encouraging the spread of education is totally bereft of sentimental moralism: “Our aim is to educate Muslims. After that, whether they become communists or communalists, terrorists or peaceniks is their business, not ours. However, we do hope that after graduating they’ll make wiser choices in all aspects of their lives. Education will do that for them. In a world mainly based on written communication, which is developing further and further in that direction every year, people who are not fully literate and who do not have a certain amount of education are easily left behind or cheated out of their due. Even someone who wants to set up just a small handicraft business would have difficulty succeeding without a basic education. Even if an entrepreneur is a *rehdi wallah* (mobile street vendor), he needs to keep a record of how much *hafta* he has to pay to the police, and how much profit he’s making. If he has not passed out of high school, he’s not able to do that very well either. High school is very basic. Even when you set up your own *jhuggi* on the roadside, you have

to be able to read and write so that those who allow you to set up the *jhuggi* for a price are not able to fool you. That's how the world is today."

Amina expands further: "A basic education for all makes life considerably easier for everyone. More than the mere practical reasons for attaining literacy and an education, it forms and enhances the cultural and social aspects of our country, which builds up the world we live in. Yes, education takes away disparity. If you go to high school, you study literature, you study language; you study the *dohas* of Kabir and Rahim. When you study, you automatically pick up cultural references. You will start to understand what is common between the world and you, between your community and you; it opens up your vistas. Now, after that, it's up to each of us. Nobody can deny that education is the best equaliser. It opens your mind, it gives you the potential to make a division of what is dogmatic and idiotic and what's available in the world for you."

Mr Shervani argues: "These advantages of a good education are relevant for everyone, but especially for minorities, who are usually disadvantaged anyway. If a minority wants to live with self-respect, they have to be even better-educated than the majority community. But here in India, Muslims are five times behind what they should be achieving in education if the proportion of their population was equivalent to their proportion passing the Board exams. *Five times behind the Hindus!* If Muslims were five times behind Brahmins, I wouldn't be as bothered; the Brahmins are very advanced in education. But if I lag five times behind the average Hindu, then what am I to conclude? After all these decades, there's no clear reason for this disparity."



Nusrat Shervani (right) an equal partner with her husband in the mission to spread education among Muslims

Asked if it could have something to do with the large numbers of Muslims living in poverty, Mr Shervani reacts sharply against the tendency to use poverty as a shield to justify non-performance: "No, I don't agree. There are many poor people in India who nevertheless are educating their children. Muslims are not as poor as the sweepers, as the Dalits. And the Dalits are three times ahead of the Muslims. Maybe this is also a factor, but what is the need to go into all that? What matters is that the Muslims need to find a way to catch up."

Mr Shervani needed detailed information about exam results in Muslim institutions to experiment

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with his strategy. He decided to focus on schools and colleges in North India to ensure greater focus and concentration, given the limited resources at his disposal. He wrote to the principal of each school in order to collect the Class X and XII Board examination results of as many Muslim institutions as he could contact in North India. More than that, he made them an offer that provided an interesting incentive: "I told them that if they would send me a simple one-page form, duly and completely filled in with the data I requested, I would send prizes for their best students. I got responses from many institutions. The average result in 1976 was about 25 percent pass in the Board exams for Class X and about 35 percent pass for Class XII. Pathetic! The proportion of first divisions was less than one percent. Miserable!"

The prizes the schools are sent are very small, Amina explains: "They're like little *shoguns* (auspicious gifts), they don't make any material difference to their lives. But they boost their morale and encourage them to do better. They are puzzled that somebody's

watching what they're doing. They would tell us in puzzlement: 'You're interested in our performance? Nobody else has ever been interested in what we're doing.' The biggest incentive is paying recognition to somebody's efforts. Sitting here in Delhi, we wrote a letter to their school, sent them a letter of appreciation, along with 105 rupees. This is a very tiny amount. And yet it works."

"And then, this is what I tell them next: First of all, you should be interested in what you're doing, even if the rest of the world is not." Mr Shervani has a 'no-nonsense' approach towards fellow Muslims: "They should understand that they're doing something for themselves. And they should not expect anyone from outside to come and help. If anybody comes and helps them, so much the better; it might give them a 5 percent advantage. However, the other 95 percent is what they have to do for themselves. Everyone says the government should do this, the rich people should do that, but I say: Why should the rich people help the poor people? If the poor people are uneducated, the rich people will have more servants, so why should a poor man expect a rich man to help his children to study? Since there is this huge social gap creating unhealthy dependencies, the education of children from the lower social strata lies in the poor people's own self-interest."

Mr Shervani says he does not hide his contempt for those who sit back and expect others to come and help them out of their misery: "I hate charity, I hate kindness! I'm very harsh and tough with people. When someone comes and says: 'I'm very poor,' I say, well you damn well deserve to be poor. You are poor because your father was a damn fool, your grandfather was a damn fool, if you also remain a fool, your children



A prize giving function in a boy's school

will also be damn fools. At least, help your children not to be poor by educating them. I never offer my shoulder for anyone to cry on. In fact, I give him two kicks to make him stop crying."

No excuses are good enough for the Shervanis when it comes to education. They get away with making their community confront harsh truths because people realise they care, and care deeply. They provide yet another glimpse of how they handle various counter arguments: "They cried: 'Oho! What can we do? Partition has broken our backs!' I said, 'Your back doesn't seem to be broken for any other thing! You are there in big numbers to watch cricket matches. You go to any damn movie-house, and if there're 10 percent Muslims in the town, then in the movie hall, there will be 40 percent Muslims for any show! If you go to any park, from among the people found roaming there, there will be more Muslims than Hindus! Your damn back doesn't seem to be broken for other things. Is it only for educating your children that your back seems broken?' Moreover, the community has broken its own damn back! Pakistan was made because

damn fools among Muslims asked for it. And you just can't get my sympathy by saying that the Partition has broken your backs. Some others will say: 'Oho, the Muslims lost their glory because the Mughal empire has gone!' I tell them, 'The Mughal empire collapsed 200 years ago! Now it won't come back. If you want to just keep sitting and crying, 'Oho, we're suffering! We're a poor minority!' I will give you two more kicks. You have to decide to move forward and then make an effort."

Although this approach may appear unkind, Amina adds, "It's an extremely effective strategy to speak your mind without mincing words, to scold in order to jolt them out of self pity. Shedding crocodile tears has never helped any community and will not help the Muslims either. It has to be stout action. It's giving them confidence, it's giving them value, a sense that 'if you are valuable to yourself, you'll be valuable to India', which works better than encouraging them to pity themselves and blame others."

The Shervanis say they are not interested in Muslim schools per se. They are focusing on them because there are nearly 15,000 high schools

in North India today. In these 15,000 schools, about 3 percent of the students would be Muslim. Says Mr Shervani: “Of the Muslims who are studying in regular schools, some are doing well, some are not doing well. Just as some Hindus are doing well, and some are not doing well. I collect data from predominantly Muslim schools because in these schools, Muslims constitute about 60 percent of the total students. So, if in about 500 schools I find more Muslims, I can do something for them.”

He wants Muslims to start new schools and take charge of the community’s education rather than sit back and complain. He says when Muslims come and tell him, ‘Oh, we have no money, we cannot run our schools’, he tells them: “Then send your children to the government, Hindu and Christian schools. I hate to see you go begging for money for your children’s education. I ask them: ‘Do you cook your own food or you’re begging for it?’ They say, ‘No, no, we cook our own food.’ I say, ‘These clothes you’re wearing, did you get them in charity?’ They say, ‘No, no, we bought these ourselves!’ ‘The house you’re living in, did someone give it to you?’ ‘No, no, we’ve built it ourselves!’ I say, ‘You live in your own house, you stitch your own clothes, you cook your own food — yet, you can’t raise money for your own school to educate your own children? You expect someone else to come and open a school? Then, why don’t you beg for your food also? You deserve much worse than what you get.’”

Not only does he get away with giving them such shock treatment, he even manages to goad them into action and open more schools: “All we need in order to get a civil society to run a Muslim school is a group of seven people living in a Muslim majority area, where there’re a larger



Professor Nurul Hasan honouring Muslim teachers who performed well at a function organised in the 1980’s by the Shervanis

number of Muslims. They get together, make a committee, register the school and begin running it with private donations and fees. And as they begin fulfilling the criteria that the government has laid down for aided schools, after three years, they can start getting government grants. Getting government grants is your right. That is not charity. But they have to make the building themselves, the government cannot give anything for the building. The government gives the money for teachers’ salaries, library, laboratory etc. I tell them, don’t beg. If you can’t

afford it, then don’t open your own school. Send your children to a common school. Why do your need your own school? Then they go back and come again to say, ‘We’ve found money for our school’. Amina adds: “Nobody wants to educate their children in government schools as far as possible, because their performance is so poor.”

For the Shervanis, the next step is to create competition among the schools; this gives the schools that are performing well and the students greater self-esteem, and shows them that their performance is valuable to themselves. He says that originally, out of all the Muslim children who appeared for the exams, more than two-thirds failed and barely one percent got a first division — all this was happening in the institutions run and managed by the Muslims themselves.

Mr Shervani explains: “Some schools were doing well, but most of them were not, and so something had to be done about it.” He evaluated the teachers subject-wise and went to the schools to show them the results of his research. Again, some

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teachers were doing fairly well, while others got very bad results. So Mr Shervani, when meeting the teachers, would say, "Such and such teachers of this or that school have attained such fine results, see! Why can't you in your school do better? You aren't so incompetent, are you?" Visiting the next school, he would tell the teachers: "The teacher in the next school teaches the same subject and gets much better results. He's much more brilliant than you!" And the teacher would reply, 'He's not even half as brilliant as I am! Next year, I'll show you my results!' And really, the next year, the fellow would achieve much better results!"

He played exactly the same game with headmasters, with individual pupils, and with entire communities. He set everybody off against each other on this competitive race! "I went to the *julaha* (weavers) community leaders and said: 'You're a very inferior sort of people! Your school has poor results as compared to the *kasais* (butchers). Their school is much better than yours!' They would retort: 'Who says butchers are superior to us? We are superior to them!' And we found that the next year, the weavers' school got better results than the butchers! Then I went to the butchers and said, 'You damn butchers, you are worse even than the weavers!'" Amina chuckles: "He played every trick that politicians play, but only for the cause of education. He set everybody off against each other to compete with each other. So, people began making more effort by giving just a little push into the right direction!"

Mr Shervani says his strategy is: "No noise, no politics, no humbug, no crying about... I don't even talk of secularism. I say all this talk of secularism is humbug, so also with communalism. I don't know what is communal. The work I do for my community, is it communal or is it not

"I tell them, don't beg. If you can't afford it, then don't open your own school. Send your children to a common school. Why do you need your own school?"

communal? I think it is communal!" based!" Thus Shervanis have lifted the word 'communal' from the political cesspool and made it conform to its real meaning. The dictionary meaning of communal is 'that which is community based.'

Amina emphasises that, "Not much has changed in the structure of the schools as such; the curriculum is the same, the managements are the same, the textbooks are the same, but nevertheless, something vital has changed."

Mr Shervani elaborates, "In 28 years, the average result of about 300 Muslim High Schools improved from hardly 25 percent pass to more than 75 percent pass. The proportion of first divisions increased from less than 1 percent to more than 10 percent. The total number of Muslim boys and girls getting first division in the Matriculation board examination from Muslim high schools of North India was, believe it or not, hardly 100 when we started our scheme. Now the number is about 6,000 or 60 times that amount. I am an inveterate optimist. Yet, even in my wildest dreams, I had not expected so much improvement."

Special Focus on Girls

Mr Shervani used an interesting strategy to get more girls admitted to a Muslim school. "When we opened a school for the Muslims, we told them that they should admit their daughters too. They insisted: 'Admit only my sons!' What about your daughters? was our reply. They responded: 'Ah... there's no need to!'"

The Shervanis put a stop to all-male admissions. "We didn't give admissions to boys unless the girls were admitted first," Amina explains. Mr Shervani continues: "We would admit only those boys whose sisters were also coming. 'If you're not educating your daughter, why educate your son? Keep both of them illiterate!' That's what we told them. Then, some sense came into them and they realised that the girls should also be educated." Amina told them, "If you don't admit your daughters, then your sons won't get admission in our schools either. And our schools are better than other schools."

Mr Shervani related this story: "The President of a high school was absent on a *Haj* for a whole year. While he was away, the Manager of the school contacted me and said, 'My daughter has passed her junior high school examination from Class 8 and I don't know where to send her, because there's no school for girls in the municipality. There's a government school, but it is located in the adjoining municipality and the relations between the two communities have not been very pleasant. Also, my daughter will have to pass through half of that area to reach that school.' I asked him: 'How many other Muslim girls have passed their Class 8 exams?' He said, 'Around half a dozen.' 'Ok,' I said, 'they will also have the same problem. However, we can't start a separate section for girls if there are only a few. Would it be possible to let them sit with the boys who have passed Class 8? And, is it possible to have some non-Muslim girls also attending your school?' He said, 'Yes, there are a few non-Muslims who would attend; the other schools are far away, and our school otherwise is nice. It has good academic standards.' We made an effort and got a dozen girls to indicate they would attend. Then I made him

open a separate section for 12 girls and 12 boys. I told him, 'Don't put too many boys in this section, otherwise the girls get sort of submerged. If their numbers stand at 12 and 12, they won't feel intimidated.' I asked him to put the best boys in this new section. So, now there was a full boys' section with about 40 or 50 boys and this other section with 12 boys and 12 girls. After a while I said, 'You can let the boys' section be larger now.' And these girls did quite well. The *Haji sahib* who had gone for *haj* stayed on there for two more years. By the time he came back, he found girls in both Class 9 and 10.

"Some people who were against co-education went up to him and said 'While you were away this Manager has done this thing against Islam. You should put a stop to it because you're the president of the school!' So, the *Haji sahib* made the committee pass a resolution that the girls' section should be stopped and that the education of the girls in the school should be stopped. Then the manager desperately telephoned me, and I told him: 'All right, from next year, you won't admit more girls. But this year, we have to let the girls complete their studies.' The *Haji sahib* finally agreed, but insisted that, from the next school year onward, the girls wouldn't be allowed to study there."

"Then I went and gave the *Haji* my opinion on his refusal to admit girls in future. He said 'We'll all go to hell if we allow co-education in our school.' I said, '*Haji sahib*, you'll go to hell in any case, whether you have co-education or not.' He asked me why. I told him, 'Because in Islam the education of a girl is as important as the education of a boy. Education is compulsory for every Muslim man and every Muslim woman. If you don't educate your daughters, you will go to hell. If you educate your



At a school in Mewat

daughters in a co-educational school, you will go to hell. Now, can you start a separate girls' school?' He said that would take time. I continued, 'Then very many of your girls won't get an education. You will go to hell!' Then he asked me: 'What should I do?' I said, 'Start making preparations for the girls' school. In one to three years, you'll be able to start it from the primary level. In five or six years, the first separate girls' school will have filled all its lower grades with girls. Ten years from now, you will no longer need to provide for co-education at any level. Until then, Shervani asked the *Haji*, "either you educate your daughters with your sons and go to hell, or keep your daughters illiterate and go to hell! Which is better?" He finally decided: 'Well, educating our daughters and going to hell is better.'" I told him:

"He set everybody off against each other to compete with each other. So, people began making more effort by giving just a little push into the right direction."

'Whatever your religious beliefs are, that is ok, but according to your religious beliefs, you have to educate your daughters, I'm not saying so, the *Quran* says so. There is a saying in the *Quran*: 'Allah helps those who help themselves. The *Quran* can't be false, can it?'"

Mr Shervani noted: "Muslim girls of UP were, educationally, the most backward among the backward in a particularly backward part of India. A small group of us decided to launch a scheme to raise academic standards and improve Board examination results of Muslim girls' inter-colleges. At that time, we found about a 1,000 general girls' inter-colleges in UP, but only 16 of them were colleges for Muslim girls." Amina reminds us that there have been some major improvements in the past 40 years: "UP is the state where more Muslims live than in about 20 so-called Muslim countries! From these 16 colleges, 901 Muslim girls appeared in the Class XII exam in 1976 and 544 (60 percent) passed. A first division among them was almost unheard of. Out of 16 colleges, in only one, the Industrial Muslim Girls College of Saharanpur, one Muslim girl attained first division. The Muslim girls in the other 15 colleges drew a blank. One out of 901

means 0.11 percent — just over one in a thousand or, to be more exact, 11 in 10,000. The non-Muslims girls did a little better, but not too well. About 70 percent passed from 10 of these 16 colleges; from one college, 3 girls out of 255 who appeared got a first division — that’s 1.18 percent from that college — still quite a poor result, but a little better than the Muslim girls’ situation in those days.”

“When we collected results from 18 Muslim girls’ colleges and found that only one Muslim girl had got first division, I told them: ‘Why don’t you burn down all these damn colleges? From 18 colleges, one girl has got first division! What’s the use of these colleges? If eight Hindu girls can get first division from *your* colleges, why don’t *your* girls get first division? From where else would you expect your daughters to get a first division?’ Look at the difference this approach brings. In 2005, 1,933 Muslim girls from 74 colleges got first division.”

“Almost 30 years later, there has been a startling turnaround. Though four of the original 16 colleges have not yet sent us their 2005 results, the results in the remaining 12 colleges have improved: In 2005, in the same inter exam, 1,923 Muslim girls appeared and 1,900, or about 99 percent passed. Yes, the performance of Muslim girls improved from 60 percent in 1976 to 99 percent in 2005. Wow indeed, but there is more. The number of first divisions attained by Muslim girls increased from *one* to 862. The proportion of first divisions among Muslim girls improved from 0.11 percent to 44.83 percent. To understand this dramatic improvement more clearly, the result improved from 11 per 10,000 to 4,483 per 10,000.”

Amina says: “This improvement did *not* come about overnight. It took 29 long years of constant effort, of



Amina in front of the filing cabinet that carries correspondence with hundreds of schools in North India

persistent endeavours. Muslim girls still lag a little behind their non-Muslim peers; 260 out of 491 non-Muslim girls who appeared for the exam obtained a first division, that’s a good 53 percent. The pass percentage for both is now almost the same but the overall proportion of first division Muslim girls in these colleges is still inferior to that of their non-Muslim classmates. However, the difference in 2005 is not so glaring as it was in 1976.”

Moreover, she highlights another aspect of the girls’ scheme the Shervanis set up. “See, the girls are

“Either you educate your daughters with your sons and go to hell, or keep your daughters illiterate and go to hell! Which is better?” *Haji sahib* finally decided: ‘Well, educating our daughters and going to hell is better.’”

doing better than the boys. As against 1,933 girls, only about 1,400 boys got first division in 2005. Women, wherever they are allowed, are doing much better than the men! And we have of course concentrated on women in a big way. Since girls started late, they pick up fast and start performing better than boys. But it’s a trauma for educated girls to be eventually fettered with boys who are drop-outs. Therefore, we feel the education level of boys must not lag behind that of girls.”

Alone, but Effective

Sadly, neither the government nor the national media have taken much notice of the achievements of the Shervanis in encouraging Muslim education. As for the media, the Shervanis respond with characteristic bluntness about its priorities: “If I said something idiotic about Imam Bukhari or on Muslim personal laws, they will all come running to cover my pronouncements. But if I say only one Muslim girl got first division 20 years ago, but this year, 1,933 Muslim girls got first division in their Board exams, they have no use for such news. It is boring!”

No less worrisome is the response of the government and Muslim intellectuals. Mr Shervani is rightly impatient when he says: “During the past 30 years, there have been more than 1,000 All-India conferences, meetings and gatherings about the terrible state of Muslim education. However, nothing has come out of them. *Nothing!*” Amina adds: “If the Government of India’s various departments could follow our strategy of simply monitoring, encouraging, and creating competition, if it just replicated this model, it would have a major impact. If each one of those who are concerned about the situation monitored five schools each, it would have a tremendous

effect. This approach can be replicated anywhere in the world.”

Even though not many have followed their example, the Shervanis carry on relentlessly. Their own family-run trust finances this work. Amina says: “We are a business family and we have the money for this kind of work, on the scale we’re doing.” When asked why they have not tried to create a bigger organisation or why they have not involved a larger team of people, Mr Shervani answers in his typical forthright manner: “We have neither asked for help nor has anyone come offering it. When I started this work, some well-meaning people like you suggested ‘why don’t you get some more people to join in this effort?’ So I got some more people; but I found that instead of helping me, they created trouble because they could not get along with each other. The effort that went into keeping that team going was disrupting my work. After the experience of two or three meetings, I stopped calling them, I said let me do what I can, let them do what they want. They are ready to work for education, but they can’t stand each other. Most people ask: what is in it for me? How does it benefit me? I was one damned fool who said I don’t want to benefit at all. I told the Muslims if you think I’m going to contest an election and ask you to vote for me, you may go to hell with all your votes! I care two hoots for your votes! Most people, who go to the Muslims, go for their votes.”

“Then some people said, ‘Why only UP, Delhi and Bihar, why not all of India’. First, I thought it was a damn good idea. Then I thought, all India is too vast and it will dilute my work. I wouldn’t have the required resources. And neither would I have the time. In UP and Bihar and Delhi itself, I have to correspond with 500 schools. If I spread this effort all over



A school function in Ferozepur Jhirka, Haryana

India, I’ll have to correspond with 1,500 or more schools. That is beyond my capacity. How many letters a day can I write?”

The lack of a big institution does not bother the Shervanis: “Let any organisation do half the work that I’ve done and then I will think about co-operating with that organisation.” Amina says it’s difficult to bring people together. It’s better to work as a smaller group than as a big institution or an organisation. The latter, she feels, does not work in India. “Ours is a very diverse country. Let everybody do his or her bit.”

Now that innumerable letters have been written, dozens of reports filed, and thousands of lives changed, Amina hopes to spread her family’s techniques to aid more disadvantaged students. “We’ll continue with what we’re doing and we hope that more people will join in.

“This improvement did not come about overnight. It took 29 long years of constant effort, of persistent endeavours.”

We’d be happy to distribute the forms that we use for requesting information from the schools; we can give others samples of the letters that we write. We are ready to give them to any groups who are ready to use them in any community. If a women’s group wants to use them, they’re welcome. The Dalits can use them to help uplift Dalits, or another Muslim group to uplift Muslims. This is a model for challenging a community with love, affection, and a bit of well-intentioned nastiness.” Without pandering to the minority complex of Muslims, the Shervanis have built a rapport with their community by showing that they care and that their actions are free of self-interest.

Mr Shervani says that he does not try to prove his credentials to the community by observing the standard rituals. “I don’t say any prayers. When I go to Muslim social gatherings and many of them get up to recite their *namaaz*, I keep sitting right there sipping away my cold drink, tea or whatever.” His inspirational *mantra* ‘Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave’ continues to motivate innumerable young people to better their lives through education. □