

# 'When a boy goes to school, he studies, when a girl goes, the world does'

## Computer, Hinduism at this co-ed madrasa

The 24-year-old sat facing his proud father, showing of his Malayalam and Sanskrit to journalists who had stopped by. He was Kashmiri, wore a skullcap and a long beard. He was sitting in a *madrasa* in Darhal village in Jammu & Kashmir.

The young man, Muhammad Asif Mir, is a hafiz, one who knows the Quran by heart. He runs a *madrasa* complex for 500 students with his father Mohammed Qayyum Mir and sister Gilshan Fatima. Apart from regular subjects like mathematics, science and computer education, students will soon also learn about Hinduism and other reli-

gions. "We don't want to just make them imams. Religious education in this region doesn't have farsightedness. Imams in mosques also need other education," said Asif Mir. "If we let them study only religion, they could become fundamentalists," he said.

Half of the staff comprises women. Girls have a separate *madrasa* but also study with boys in a school — an achievement that came after tough opposition from parents. "When a boy goes to school, he studies. When a girl goes to school, the world does," said Qayyum Mir. But the State's politics, and the result of the current elections, could

decide whether this landmark experiment succeeds in the State. National Conference patriarch Sheikh Abdullah inaugurated the Jamia Mohammadiya madrasa in 1978.

During the past two decades, the school has often faced pressure from militants. Despite that, Asif Mir and his family plod on. He has brought teachers from Kerala. He studied there years ago, and learnt Malayalam by default. He then started an interesting study of comparative religions. The *madrasa* wants to bring in all strands of multiculturalism as it innovates education.

(Courtesy: Hindustan Times)

## Kashmiri pandits build bridges with Muslims

Vijay Chikan Koul, a Kashmiri pandit, has embarked on a mission to heal the wounds and build bridges with Muslims in Kashmir.

And that is why he has chosen Sopore constituency, the hometown of Hurriyat hawk Syed Ali Shah Geelani, to contest his maiden elections which he says is a "challenge worth accepting".

Nineteen years ago, Koul was forced to leave his home in Habba Kadal to lead a life of refugee in Jammu. "I was not expecting such a good response from Kashmiri Muslims. When I had to produce sponsors at the time of filing my nominations, I was overwhelmed by the support I got, many Muslims came to support my candidature," says Koul.

Koul is among the 15 candidates fielded by the National United Front (NUF), a political organisation floated by migrated pandits in the valley. Riding high on the *Kashmiriyat* wave, the Kashmiri pandits are seeking support from Muslims to revive the age-old bonding.

"All 15 seats are from the Kashmir Valley because we belong to that place and we're emotionally attached to it. We hope we will win some seats because we seek votes on *Kashmiriyat* coupled with development and prosperity," A.K. Diwani, president of the National United Front, said.

(Courtesy: Daily News & Analysis)

## What women want?

Mehbooba Mufti is my idol", said 22-year-old Tazim Akhtar. The first year B.Sc student was at the only cyber café-cum-computer training in Rajouri in Jammu & Kashmir taking computer lessons.

Unlike two other boys taking the lessons, she didn't have the slightest hesitation in voicing her views. When I quizzed her on Bollywood, she made it clear she knew her Shahid (Kapoor) from her Shah Rukh ("Why are you asking me all this? I watch the news, I read, I know") but stuck to what seemed her favourite topic — Mehbooba. "She is very knowledgeable and knows how to be a good leader." Tazim said. "At the same time, she knows how to maintain her culture. See how she covers her head with the scarf?"



If Tazim chose a politician as a role model, the dream of 19-year-old college girl Poonan Sharma in Poonch is to be "like (TV journalist) Barkha Dutt".

In Jammu, we noticed the girls wore western clothes. But as we push to the interiors, the dresses got conservative salwar kameez and scarves. When I pointed this out to 23-year-old Zaheeda Akhtar in Rajouri, she retorted: "It's the mind that matters, not the clothes."

Zaheeda, a schoolteacher, said she could not pursue a post-graduate degree for want of support from her family. But she has tried to make up for it. She counsels parents about the benefits of education for their daughters. "Parents don't want girls to study," she explained. Her efforts are already showing results. "Earlier, there were 10 students in our school, now there are 50. And out of that, 25 are girls.

For that to happen, taking part in polls is important. Even a woman from nomadic Gujjar community, Shamim, told us she would vote.

Mehbooba agreed. When told she was role model for many girls, she said: "I don't know if I am a role model. That is not important. What important is who is going to lead Jammu out of its trouble."

(Courtesy: Hindustan Times)

## Now, you can choose your exam date at IGNOU

It's a revolution! Nearly two million students pursuing education in the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) across India and abroad will soon be able to choose their examination date.

"No stress, no fixed exam date. Students can walk in to examination leaving behind stress, tension or fear," IGNOU spokesman Ravi Mohan said.

"Walk-in-examinations would give learners the liberty to decide the dates of exams as per their convenience, thus lowering the exam pressure on them and thereby bringing down the percentage of failures," he added.

The varsity, which has presence in over 35 countries across the globe, said that under the scheme, students, instead of waiting for the six-monthly term end examination, could simply walk into any identified test centres of the university. The results would be processed on a monthly basis.

## PIO's book nominated for British lit prize

Times journalist Sathnam Sanghera is the latest British-Asian to blaze a literary trail as his book on the travails of his Sikh immigrant family has been short listed for the biography prize at the British Costa Book Awards for 2008.

The book began as a letter to his mother explaining why he was not ready for an "arranged marriage". Sanghera started looking for possible objections from his parents to his decision and that led him to forage his family history from when his parents came to Britain from rural Punjab in India.

Sanghera said: "If You Don't Know Me By Now: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton' is not a book on misery, but funny," reports The Times.

Sanghera was born in England in 1976 and joined The Financial Times in 1998 after graduating from Cambridge. He joined The Times in 2007.

Judges who short listed Sanghera's book said: "Quietly witty, engrossing and tragicomic - this insight into parallel culture in Britain today is the poignant story of an exceptional family that everyone should read."

The Costa Book Awards are considered a prestigious literary prize in Britain. The prize was established in 1971 as Whitbread Book Awards to recognise the "most enjoyable" books by writers based in Britain and Ireland. Since 2006 they are known after their current owner Costa Coffee.

## Charter Night dinner



(From left): Asif Ibrahim, Dr. G.S. Gujral CBE, Lord Dholakia, Shiv Shankar Mukherjee, Dr. J.K. Nayar, Surinder Aujla, Indy Aujla and Dr. Rami Ranger MBE.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (The whole world is one family). This is how the High Commissioner of India, Shiv Shankar Mukherjee, described the ethos of India. He was addressing the Friends Circle

International's Charter Night dinner at the millennium Hotel in Knightsbridge, London, where he was the guest of honour. He said that in this ever shrinking world, we must consider ourselves as citizens of the world and live in peace and harmony. He congratulated Indy and Surinder Aujla for taking the oath to serve mankind and to work to promote tolerance in today's society.

The president, Lord Dholakia, welcomed the guests. He also presided over the oath ceremony which made the Aujlas charter members.

Dr. Nayar, founder and world president, explained the need for "an inclusive society in today's fractured world. We must always work towards improving the lot of the less fortunate in society and share our fortunes with them." The chairman, Dr. S. P. Sharma, thanked the guests and especially His Excellency for taking time out to attend the event.