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Daraksha (in a headscarf) in class. Photographs: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

Delhi's Belly | An equal music

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Pallavi Singh

As the first batch of girls graduate from one of the Walled City's oldest schools, it prepares for more change

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Close

Behind a tall, wrought-iron gate with sparse black paint peeling, the 300-year-old Anglo-Arabic Senior Secondary School at Ajmeri Gate, Delhi, is in the throes of change.

Past the numerous sandstone arches that adorn its façade, a large courtyard spreads into corridors and rooms where dozens of masons are busy restoring the heritage building. A library damaged by last year's rain has been fixed with fresh white paint and teak-wood doors. The green Kota stone floor of an auditorium, complete with carpeted stage, glistens. Next to the din of renovation, a small, crowded chamber has anxious parents, including women in black veils, exchanging notes on admission fees and dates. As the classes disperse for lunch, a boy tells a girl, "You have been chosen class monitor." Before the girl can react, he mocks, "In your dream!" They sprint and disappear.

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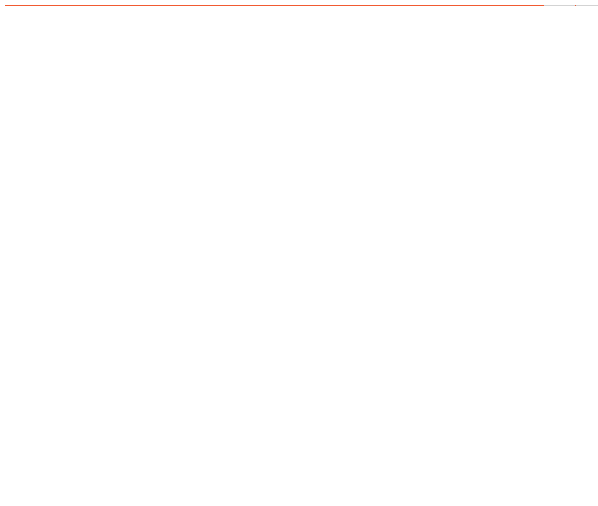
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In Daraksha Fatima's class of 200, dominated by boys, one often hears jokes about having girls in the classroom. Mohammad Zeeshan, 17, says the presence of girls makes him uncomfortable; he doesn't "feel free" to say or do whatever he likes.

While his class XII colleagues nod in chorus, Daraksha says studying with boys makes her two younger sisters and her competitive—they were the first three girls admitted to the school.



Ramsha (from left), Gulafsha and Daraksha at home with the Aakash tablet

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“Girls have exhibited their keenness to study further. They are smart, in fact smarter than we expected, and absolute go-getters,” says Faiza Nissar Ali, who was the first female teacher to join the school, in 2006.

In May 2012, when the school set up in the 1690s decided to admit girls, a new beginning was made, grudgingly—the internal report that recommended co-education was termed “un-Islamic” and the majority of its male staff opposed it. Yet the school admitted 54 girls. It is the only co-education school among the 63 government-run schools in Old Delhi; 25 of these schools are for girls.

The impact is clearly visible. Girls have done better than boys in the internal exams in every stream other than science; Ali tries to explain this. The school lowered its cut-off for admission to the science stream last year to attract more girls. “This means that girls with average marks were also admitted, which is why they couldn’t cope with the science subjects.”

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Boards. "It's in their body language—the aggression," Ahmad says. "Many of them are from broken families and their emotional conflicts make them aggressive and violent."

The aggression, however, is slowly giving way to cooperation in classrooms, says Saba Rehman, who teaches English. "The acceptance was slow to come by but the boys are now working with girls in class projects. Being in a class together fosters learning for both boys and girls and helps them deal with situations in rational ways," Rehman adds.

At lunch, girls and boys go their different ways

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Nine more women were appointed last year. As the school opened up, employees like Ali and Rehman, who had spent seven years at the school without a staff room or toilets for women, discovered the side benefits: They got the basic amenities.

Change is coming, but slowly, to the school which has produced students like Sir [Syed Ahmed Khan](#), the eminent educationist and founder of Aligarh Muslim University; [Liaquat Ali Khan](#), Pakistan's first prime minister; and [Mirza Nasir-ud-din Masood](#), an Indian hockey Olympian.

During lunch break, there is a strict demarcation of spaces for boys and girls. Boys crowd the canteen. There is a separate counter in a corner for girls, but food is served to them in their common room. In the classrooms, boys and girls sit in separate rows. As the school closes, girls are asked to leave 5 minutes before the boys to ensure "safe passage".

The unease often finds expression in jokes in the teachers' staff room. "Often, the male staff playfully offers us their staff room. They say we will need more space given

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This is the question Nazma Parveen asked herself last year. The widowed mother of Daraksha, Ramsha and Gulafsha, who lives in Ballimaran, couldn't resist the school's offer to waive fees and open the science stream to girls in classes XI and XII. But she says she didn't sleep well for a month when her daughters started attending the school.

"I worried about their safety; I still do. My daughters are fatherless. They have no one to look after them when they go to school. I pray every day that they flunk their tests but they keep doing better," she says.

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Girls rush out as school closes

The class VI student says she will braid her hair until her school uniform—salwar-kameez with a mandatory headscarf—arrives.

Class XII student Saima Khan's mother has told her never to cut her hair. But she cut herself side bangs. "No one figures out," she says, pointing to the self-styled bangs pulled back by a hairpin.

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