

Light in the darkness

If it were not for night schools many underprivileged individuals would be languishing in the dark alleys of society. Despite hundred years of existence and a history of noble work, the institution remains unsupported by the government and society, says Nikita Ketkar.

"The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained in sudden flight but, they while their companions slept, were toiling upwards in the night."

— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, American poet, educator and linguist

BURNING the midnight oil and learning under dull lights of a night school, the former chief minister of Maharashtra Sushil Kumar Shinde may have never thought that one day he would be heading one of the biggest states in the country. Like Shinde there are many others whose aspirations for gaining academic knowledge are fulfilled by night schools. Night schools were set up in Mumbai about 100 years ago with the intention of providing a means of education to the migrant population and their children from rural areas. The first night school was set up in Mumbai in 1906. They are unique in that they provide a formal system of education to the underprivileged youth. Over the years these have become an important means of education for students who are unable to attend day schools as well as for those who wish to earn while they learn. In Maharashtra, these institutions are run by charitable trusts supported by salary grants of the government's education department.

At present there are 210 night schools in the state of Maharashtra providing education to approximately 40,000 students in the age group of 14 to 19 years. Various trusts run 126 night schools in Mumbai, out of which nearly 100 operate from the school premises of the Municipal Corporation spread across its various wards. Apart from English, the medium of instruction in some of these schools is Marathi, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Gujarati and Hindi.

Many obstacles

Despite being in existence for so many years night schools lack basic amenities such as libraries, science laboratories and computers. The absence of non-salary grants and other funds have made it difficult to even buy textbooks, notebooks and teacher learning materials. They are unable to provide services such as student counselling, teacher training,



Maratha Mandir Night school, Worli

parents' workshops, vocational guidance, basic health facilities and evening meals for students. Further these schools do not offer even basic opportunities for holistic development. Important subjects such as music and sports do not find any place in the curriculum.

Night schools function for only three hours every evening unlike day schools that have 5 1/2 hours of classes. However, it is expected of the teachers and students to complete the same syllabi as day schools in the given time. With day school teachers doubling their shifts to teach at night schools, the problem is further compounded. There is an alarming increase in the number of dropouts from these schools due to lack of basic educational facilities. The provision of Form 17 has made it easy for a 14-year-old to appear for class 10 examination irrespective of whether he has completed the 8th or 9th standard education or not. This has enabled students to legally avoid a school environment and still appear for exams for a higher standard. This has proved to be extremely detrimental to the class strength of night schools and research has shown that there is a considerable drop in the number of students in classes 8th and 9th. Students in night schools work during the day to make a living for themselves and to support their families. Without access to nutritional supplements and evening meals they find it very difficult to concentrate in class on empty stomachs. Visually challenged students have even more problems in the absence of Braille