



BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL: This night school in Parel is Mumbai's second oldest

his night school comprises a merry bunch of errand boys, canteen and hotel workers, aspiring hoodlums and even a 62-year-old who immersed himself in studies after his mother passed away. If they have one thing in common, it's the desperate will to pass Class X despite having access to a fraction of the facilities available in a regular school.

There are 210 night schools across the state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai has 150. Typically, they function for two hours every evening and are attended by students who work to support themselves during the day. The schools have as much infrastructure as a village pathshala. Night schools lack facilities as they are dependent upon the generosity of day schools. Most are attached to municipal schools or Jesuit institutions and are only allowed to occupy classrooms space once day-scholars have left.

Municipal institutions are naturally possessive of their own meagre facilities and reluctant to allow night students to use their laboratories and libraries. So, there are SSC students who never see the inside of a science lab until the day before the board exam. They have to sit on uncomfortable benches and are taught by teachers who work double shifts just as their students do — in municipal schools by day and night schools in the evening.

Activist Nikita Ketkar, whose voluntary organisation Masoom is among the few non-governmental organisations that support night schools, says, "The only time of year that any of the 20,000 students who study by night receive some attention is when the annual SSC results are declared and the night school topper is announced. It may shock you to learn that the pass percentage is

PYTHAGORAS AT PM

Maharashtra has 210 night schools. Of these, 150 are in Mumbai

They cater largely to the migrant population

All of Mumbai's night schools are privately run

90 per cent of them run out of BMC school premises

Goa has one night school, Delhi has none

Kolkata has night colleges

Madhya Pradesh has barefoot night schools. These are social initiatives that impart informal education

about 40-50 per cent but I believe that every student who makes it through Class X is an individual miracle."

To show the difficulties students overcome, Ketkar, a former civil services officer who got interested in night schools while working on a project on child domestic workers, took TOI-Crest on a tour of Milind Night School in Parel. Here, boys and girls who run pan-beedi shops or cook and clean for eight hours a day, cycle furiously to reach school by 6.30 pm. "Some parents and employers are encouraging of their efforts but there are (also) those who believe filling water or waiting at tables during the evening peak hour would be more helpful than (studying in) a classroom," says TV Rangaswamy, a teaching volunteer who tries hard to squeeze a full syllabus into a two-hour school day. Recently, Masoom teamed

up with the Night School Headmasters' Association to make a formal representation to the state government for basic facilities for night schools.

The students and teachers of the night schools we visited share a close bond. At Milind Night School, classes were let off early during *Shravan* to allow fasting Hindu children to eat, while at St Xavier's, a separate room has been allocated to Muslim youngsters for *iftar*, as the time to break fast during Ramzan coincided with class.

All this trouble is taken for the kids to clear a simple hurdle called the SSC exam. "Without this basic qualification, it is too to enter any kind of vocation," says Eric, who holds a job at a aquarium and will use his school certificate to migrate to Taiwan or Malaysia in search of better prospects.