

**EDUCATION, NATION AND GENDER: GROUP IDENTITIES
WITHIN SCHOOLS IN NAGAON DISTRICT OF ASSAM**

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Educational institutions are entrusted with the task of shaping future citizens who will adhere to the moral guidelines of a nation. Schools are often considered by scholars as a site of production and reproduction of subjects who will be best suited to serve the nation and continue its legacy by maintaining its honour, tradition and culture. One key aspect of school life is to train students into becoming good citizens through categories of gender. These constructions of identities in school are however driven by the politics of the dominant order of society through the representation of their symbols and cultures.

Existing work on school education provides the ground to engage in this process of identity construction in school. This work seeks to examine how identity formation is guided by the dynamics of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and language. Schools, based on their specific context, promote a certain form of identity as the standard one. Pierre Bourdieu talks about the reproduction of social inequalities in schools which results in the privileging of certain identities in social, symbolic and cultural aspects. The privileging of certain form of attributes and behaviours in school leads to the marginalisation of other existing identities. Literature suggests the influence of class, culture and ethnicities on schooling experiences of students from marginalised communities and classes. However, in Indian context, the studies on sociology of education have tended to focus on class and gender, with a few talking about ethnicity (Hussain, 2019). Additionally, the idea that national identity is formed on the basis of multiple community identity is not sufficiently addressed.

This, thesis attempts to bridge the gap in literature in the sphere of sociology of education, concerning issues of identity focusing mainly on national identity and how it is shaped by various other group identities in Assam. In my empirical work I focus on the question of how school plays a role in the construction and maintenance of national identity through its curricular and disciplinary practices and contributes to the legitimisation of certain identities and marginalisation of others. The question of citizenship and indigeneity that dictates the identity politics of Assam also plays an important role in understanding the boundary maintenance patterns among groups. This study by engaging with diverse dimensions of school life is also an attempt to

understand how marginalised sections negotiate and assert their identities within the domain of school.

When we try to understand nationalism in Assam, it is the linguistic identity that emerges as the prime factor. The historic Assam movement, based on the issues around immigration and the threat to the culture and language of the state, played a major role in igniting and constructing the seeds of Assamese nationalism among the Assamese middle class. This production of the feeling of nationalism was then taken up by the rest of the people and this assertion based on Assamese language became especially important in the Brahmaputra valley.

This study is based on the fieldwork carried out in educational institutions located in the district of Nagaon. This district has been a centre of formal education since the colonial times under various community led initiatives. It also has an important legacy in terms of promotion of women's education in Assam. The population of the district includes multiple groups of people with a majority of Muslims among religious groups (Census, 2011). However, Muslims do not constitute a homogenous group and the large majority of Muslim with East Bengal origin are treated differently from Muslims who speak Assamese. Nagaon is also famous as the birthplace of Srimanta Sankardeva, the Vaishnavite saint of Assam, the regional icon, attributed with bringing the Assamese community under a single fold. This backdrop of the field site with contesting features provides a fertile ground to understand the formation of community identity in the context of national identity formation.

This study uses a qualitative approach to look at the ceremonial and curricular activities as well as disciplinary mechanisms to understand the process of construction as well as resistance to the dominant idea of nation, gender and community identity. I selected two schools with different organisational affiliations and social composition. Most of the empirical materials are drawn from a government funded Assamese medium school. Like most other government schools in urban areas, it attracts students from the lower economic background of the town. Among them a large section consists of Muslim population.

The second school is a private vernacular medium school affiliated to the Shishu Shiksha Samiti in Assam and Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan and is committed to a specific vision of Hindu nationalism. The school caters to only Hindu students from

Assamese and Bengali speaking communities from the lower and middle income backgrounds.

To realise the objectives of the study, this thesis is divided into four main chapters, apart from the introduction and conclusion. The first core chapter deals with the construction and reproduction of dominant ideas associated with the nation at school. The first three chapters draw on the first school while the fourth chapter draws on the second school.

The second chapter focuses on school specific ceremonies in its academic calendar and representation of icons in the school premises. The observation of the ceremonies in schools helped the researcher in identifying the dominant identities celebrated at school and bringing out the nuances that exists within the school space among the students and the authorities in terms of gender, caste, class, religion and linguistic communities. The schools through the celebration of the daily morning assembly tries to create a collective moral identity among its members who are expected to show their allegiance towards the nation and sustain the idea of its existence everyday by being a member of the 'imagined' community of the nation. This daily reiteration of the nation in the daily course of schooling might seem mundane and least interesting or motivating to the students, yet this daily chanting of remembering the nation makes them consider the national and regional songs as something sacred, as part of tradition, that is necessary in order to bring the nation into existence. The observations are like the arguments by McLaren (1983), that the ideologies that are consistent with that of the dominant sections of the society and culture are reproduced and transmitted through the schooling process. However, these celebrations also bring forth the differences that exist among the student population in their modes of participation and the way the school expects them to participate based on their social and gender identities. Observation of the celebration of Independence Day demonstrates the kind of citizens the schools expect to produce and reveals the ones who are allowed to participate in it. *Saraswati puja* emerged as the most popular event from the calendar for students, which apart from representing the Hindu goddess of learning also allowed students to get involved in the celebrations, while positioning them differently in terms of community and gender.

Chapter Three looks at the promotion of a particular language at school, leading to its legitimisation, and how this legitimisation raises the status of the community members who are associated with the language. It is clear that the Assamese language is given

prominence in the school under study. As a result, the language takes on the character of a symbolic capital, and its speakers are granted unique hierarchical standing. Thus, the school's native Assamese speakers, namely the Hindu Assamese and the *Goriya* Muslims, enjoy a privileged status among the teachers and students. This greater status bestowed upon a particular language identity is influenced by one's religion and ethnic identity as well.

Linguistic identity is extremely important in the context of identity politics in Assam. This language-based identity is linked to the issue of indigeneity in this part of the region, and the school students are not immune to these influences. According to the findings of the study, the majority of the students regard Assamese to be their mother tongue. In the school under study, certain notions guide the students' consideration of Assamese as their mother tongue, such as recognition of the language as the standard and proper language, association of language with place of origin, association of language with place of residence, and for some, as an attempt to assimilate or identify with the dominant culture prevalent in the school in particular and the state in general.

It is also discovered that the school's students formed their identities in connection to others. They frequently practiced distancing when constructing such identities. These practices were influenced by ideas about conduct, language, culture, religion, and academic merit of other students. In terms of identification, a prominent polarising identity based on language and religion was noticed among the students. Students of East Bengal origin identified their peers primarily on the basis of their religion and saw the *Goriyas* or native Assamese Muslims as similar to them, belonging to the same religion. While the latter constantly demarcated themselves from the East Bengal origin students and asserted their Assamese identity. All non-Assamese speakers at the school, on the other hand, identify Assamese people as Hindus.

Perceptions of hierarchies based on their language identities is present among the students. These are based on the inter group and intra group perceptions. For example, students of East Bengal origin laugh at one another, whereas students speaking in the standard Assamese language are held in high regard. Shame and belongingness were also important elements in language identity. With the *Miya* identity defined as a stigmatised social identity and frequently linked with 'illegal Bangladeshis' by dominant sections of the region, their identification with the Assamese language is seldom appreciated or

acknowledged. This is also visible in the study, as students speaking the mainstream language refer to students from the East Bengal minority as *khati Miya*. However, it also gives rise to forms of resistance where students resort to identify themselves with this stigmatised identity. Language thus creates social inequalities among the population and it is reflected in the school under study.

The fourth chapter engages specifically with the disciplinary mechanisms adopted at the school. Through disciplinary mechanism the schools try to create their desired 'gendered' subjects who would adhere to the norms established by the school to become the perfect citizen of the nation in the long run. This is done by the school by controlling the bodies of students, specially the female body. Different mechanisms are adopted by the school such as restricting the intermixing of genders, enforcing norms of dressing, and appropriate 'gendered' conduct in terms of docility, avoiding violence and so on. While asserting its idea of a disciplined gendered body, the school present and legitimise the culture of a particular class, i.e., the middle class, as the norm to be followed by all. The role and importance given to women become important factors in maintaining discipline in the school. Middle-class femininity with its demeanor and attributes were held at a high status and were expected to be emulated by the students. The teachers often devalued students based on the ethnic and class background of the students. The mothers of these students were presumed to lack basic parenting skills such as

maintenance of hygiene and imparting 'school appropriate' forms of gendered manners. Ironically such presumptions make women teachers assume the role of guiding the students through controlling their own ways of dressing and conduct at school. This chapter also takes note of the subtle resistance on the part of the students to express their own distinct identity within the space of the school.

Chapter Five examines a different school with a contrast in students' population and organisational affiliation. The vernacular medium private school belonging to the Vidya Bharati is financially independent and is committed to the organisation's ideology to promote a particular kind of educational environment within its school premises. The idea of Hindu nationalism is the guiding principle behind its framing of national identity consciousness among its students. This school caters mostly to the lower-middle class population and also has a wide acceptance among the caste Hindu Assamese population owing to its adoption of key regional symbols. It includes adoption of Assamese as the

medium of instruction and naming of the school after the regional icon and Vaishnavite saint of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva. This particular school maintains an exclusively Hindu population and follows their own textbooks (up to Class VIII) and curricular materials.

The assessment of the school's ideas, visual representations, and disciplinary processes reveal its goal of instilling ideas about Hindu nationalism in the children. We can see here that a specific type of nation, namely a Hindu nation, is tacitly depicted and portrayed. At various levels, there is also an attempt to forge a link between the nation and the regional aspects by evoking individuals of national and regional importance and attempting to portray them as same in nature- via language, ceremonies, and significant people. Various tensions and conflicts arises when trying to implement this process, but the school appears to be succeeding in its goal of spreading Sanskritic high culture despite being an Assamese medium institution.

The school administration, teachers, and students' parents are expected to work together to guide the students. In terms of gender, the school appears to adhere to caste-Hindu middle-class gender norms, particularly for women. Modesty in actions and dressing is an essential criterion to be met particularly by the female members of the school. Women of the school, both the teachers and the female students are expected to follow the traditional roles of the existing society while at the same time excelling in their professional field. Thus, it was observed throughout the course of the study that even though women are expected to be financially independent and accomplish greater aims in the professional sector, they are expected to remain anchored to their 'natural' impulse and obligation of becoming mothers. This concept of 'motherhood' was supposed to be inherited by the female students as well.

6.1 Major findings of the study

Based on the observations from the chapters, it was found that though the schools studied were affiliated to two different organisations and catered to completely different sets of student populations, certain themes were found to be common to both of them. There is a difference in the sense of practicing it within the schools, but the overall discourse presented appeared to be similar in many respects. These major findings are explained below thematically-

6.1.1 Interplay of national and regional elements

In the schools, there was a conscious attempt to bring the regional and national elements together through school practices. This idea of bringing both the elements together in schools is important from the perspective of the nation-building process considering the history of the state of Assam around issues of identity politics and Assamese nationalist projects with 'mainland' India. These schools try to bring about and maintain a balance between both the sentiments among the students while the way it is articulated and its practice varies. In the private school considering its connection with the Vidya Bharati organisation and its specific idea of nation-building, the balance between pan-Indian identity and regional attachment is sought to be maintained through the celebration of regional figures and promotion of Assamese language as the mother-tongue on one hand, and celebration of national and Hindu mythological figures, primacy to the Sanskrit language on the other. In the government school this harmonious connection between the national and the regional element is established through the celebration of regional events and commemorating regional figures of cultural and political importance, while at the same time celebrating the nation through events hailing the constitution and Indian freedom struggle, as well as national figures. This synthesis of national and regional elements is portrayed through visual imageries and ceremonies.

6.1.2 Women as a symbol of nation's cultural identity

Women in the context of reproduction of the nation are considered, as Davis (2008) has argued, as biological reproducers, as cultural reproducers and lastly as embodiment of the homeland. In the case of India, to create the Indian woman who is at par with modern times, the nationalist project deemed it appropriate to entrust upon women the above mentioned attributes to be able to better reproduce the nation. Indian women in particular were symbolised as the guardian of the spiritual domain that resides within the inner space of home. Education in this respect was considered as the tool to culturally refine and reproduce the desired woman (Chatterjee, 1997). This version of refined womanhood perceived femininity as based on class and acknowledged a certain form of femininity to be the standard form. This notion of femininity based on class that the nationalist project promoted was observed to be actively practiced by both the schools under study as well. These schools focus on shaping and reproducing a particular model of woman as ideal to symbolise the nation. There was strict surveillance in terms of dress

codes for female students and teachers. Women as symbolic border guards (Armstrong, as cited in Davis, 1997) expected to maintain the distinction of community identity is expressed in these schools through cultural reproduction of their dress. In both the schools importance is given to *sador mekhela* considering it to be the hallmark of Assamese identity. In the government school, the hierarchical division in aspect of class among teachers and students, and difference in terms of their community identity is reflected through the perception held towards dress, in this case *sador mekhela* and saree. The teachers conformed to the typical middle-class Assamese conception of femininity by giving importance to *sador mekhela* over saree or any other attire to mark their distinctive Assamese community identity, which Medhi (2021) has explained in the construction of the *aideo* in Assam, i.e the embodiment of the ideal woman to depict the distinct Assamese community identity in contrast to the other communities of Assam of the 19th and 20th century. The female students at the government school, though none of them identified themselves primarily as Assamese, considered *sador mekhela* as a sign of prestige (as something to show familiarity with) and connected it especially with the Assamese speaking community. In the private school, *sador mekhela* is accorded a special status by prescribing it as uniform of the female teachers as a mark of Assamese identity, considering the medium of instruction of the school. Thus, in the study it was found how *sador mekhela* still remains an exclusive element of a classed-feminine-community identity. But, many female students, unlike the teachers of both the schools wore saree as traditional attire on special occasions. These students take it upon themselves to wear 'traditional' dress on particular religious ceremonies, while majority of the male students felt shy to come wearing dhoti with kurta, but were comfortable wearing a kurta with pajama or jeans. Most of them were shy to wear a dhoti and considered it too traditional to wear. Thus we can see that girls have internalised their expression of community identity through dress through the process of schooling as a medium.

The idea of the ideal femininity did not remain limited only to the domain of dress in the schools, but it was monitored in terms of bodily movements and conduct of the female students as well. While in the government school the students since they belonged primarily to economically weak as well as socio-culturally backward class, as compared to the teachers of the school, had their sexuality looked at as a threat and they were considered unruly and in need of being inculcated with 'proper' manners and behaviours

considering their lack of knowledge of it. In the private school, since the students and teachers belonged mostly to the same socio-cultural position, the perspective of viewing them was different. Nevertheless their sexuality was considered to be a threat here too and the teachers considered it to be their moral responsibility to ‘protect’ their female students by educating them as well as their parents, especially their mothers.

This imagination of women in both the schools is similar to the nationalist construction of the ideal women who is supposed to be a combination of ancient as well as modern values. As argued by Ramaswamy (2007), where the nation imagined as a Goddess reflects both ancient and modern constructions. The women of the schools under study are supposed to represent a similar narrative of being present in the ‘modern professional’ world while maintaining their traditional roles and duties- of motherhood, of the kitchen and modesty.

6.1.3 Legitimisation of ‘Assamese’ language and culture

As educational institutions of vernacular medium, it was observed in both the schools that there was an attempt to popularise and legitimise standard Assamese as the ideal and standard language for all. In the government school, distinctions and differentiation were made based on the proper articulation of the language among the students. The students too valued and marked themselves and others based on their ability to speak Assamese ‘properly’ and fluently. Thus, by legitimising a standard language the school is promoting a culture of social inequality based on language within the school campus which is influenced by the dominant social order and also extends beyond the school premises. The socio-economic as well as the cultural background of the students, belonging primarily from the marginalised section makes them accept the dominant language ideology imparted by the school more easily without much conflict and reflection. In the private school, similarly, Assamese was presented as the mother-tongue of all when any discussion on mother-tongue took place.

There was an emphasis on the dress of women particularly in the government school where it was almost a necessary mandate for the female teachers to wear *sador mekhela* to school on special occasions. This necessity was justified by many teachers as maintaining the tradition and culture, as being Assamese and staying in Assam it is considered best if they wore *sador mekhela* on special occasions instead of saree/kurta or other western wear. This emphasis on *sador mekhela* also highlights the importance

attributed to class in shaping ones' ethnic community identity. As discussed in the previous section, the importance of *sador mekhela*, as a marker of Assamese identity, is based on ideas of middle-class femininity.

The teachers of the private school have *sador mekhela* as their uniform in almost all the schools of VB board in the Brahmaputra valley, considering the medium of instruction of the school and also symbolising the legitimisation of an Assamese identity through the dress of the female teachers.

As Bourdieu, states that educational institutions demand similar cultural capital from everyone while at the same time not imparting what it seeks to demand.(1973) This study finds that the schools studied, particularly the government school seeks to demand clarity and fluency in Assamese language from non-Assamese speakers, while stereotyping and mocking the students unable to attain the standards.

6.1.4 Normalisation of a 'Hindu' nation and 'Hindu' symbols

While there is a stark difference in terms of students' population in the schools and organisational affiliation, it was observed that there is an attempt made to normalise and represent the nation as a Hindu nation in the schools. This can be concluded based on the celebrations that take place within the school academic year. This does not seem to conflict in or can be considered unusual for the private school as its ideology is based on the promotion of Hindu culture and traditions. But it must be mentioned here that promotion of Hindu culture and tradition does not imply promotion of Hinduism as a religion, as described in the concept of Hindutva (Deshpande, 2003). However, by restricting the entry of Muslim students to the school and creating a space just for the Hindu students, the school tries to promote a kind of a single idea of a nation in a discreet manner. The worshipping of Hindu idols, chanting of Sanskrit prayers, and shlokas were justified and speculated as to the reason for the exclusion of Muslim students from the school by the authorities.

In the case of the government school where the majority of the students belong to the minority Muslim community, an attempt is made to incorporate different elements, but Hindu religious symbols emerge dominantly in their celebration. For example, the grand celebration of Saraswati puja venerating the Hindu goddess of knowledge, and adopting of Hindu ritual practice in many events. While Saraswati puja has become more like a

part of popular culture, the religious attribution of this festival and the negotiations that encompass these celebrations cannot be overlooked. On the other hand, an attempt is made to celebrate the other culture as a token gesture (Fateha-doaz-daham), even when the district, as well as the school, has most of the Muslim population. This significance given to certain ceremonies guides the narrative of the school to a similar direction of a 'Hindu' national identity construction. Apart from that as Bannerji (2006) argues in the case of the Hindutva ideology that the concept of the Hindu form of cultural nationalism is normalized to such an extent that it often is considered to equate "Indian" culture. In the case of the discourse of the majority teachers (Hindu) of both the schools, this normalisation of the 'Hindu' culture to 'Indian' culture is observed when it comes to the practice of certain rituals and cultures. However not all the students of the schools under study considered this dictate of the schools and expressed their differences in citing the nation as one comprising of and for people of diverse religions. Yet a majority of the students of the private school held the view that it is quite common to practice Hindu ways of life when one stays in India where Hinduism is the majoritarian religion. In the case of the government school where a majority of the teachers are Hindus and a majority of the students are Muslims, the imbalance of power relationship often makes the teachers impose their own identities on the students in a more indirect fashion. For instance, during the celebration of Saraswati puja, the teachers would encourage the Muslim students and would consider it normal for them to take 'phoot', engage in prayer sessions that have a religious hue to them. Similarly, ideas about caste-Hindu and middle-class norms of 'respectability' define their ideas of good conduct and appearance.

6.2. Directions of the study

During the course of the study from the understanding of the students of both the schools it was realized that textbooks play a very important role in their construction of certain identities, especially gender identities. The present study could not focus on analysis of textbooks, the incorporation of which would help in better contextualizing the study.

The study was also not able to unravel in depth the family relation of the students due to restrictions of pandemic days. Throughout the study, the important role that family background plays in the construction as well as perception of identity has been highlighted. The study of the family dynamics by bringing in the views of the parents and neighbourhood would have enriched the work more.

Over the course of the PhD programme, it was realized that the issue of formation of group-identities among youths and in general is indeed vast. The present study was able to touch these issues partially, which only highlighted the fact that multiple and complex group-identity formation with changing dynamics leaves ample scope to delve into something new. Thus, leaving the researcher with rekindled interest to continue working in this field.