

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study examines questions of formations of group-identity through schooling in relation to ideas of community and national identity from a gendered perspective in Nagaon district of Assam.

Identity acts as the root of meaning-making and experience of people (Castells, 1997). Identity of a person is not a single entity, but is composed of multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting identities. Individuals assert their identity on the basis of their social locations (Ross,2007). Thus identities, as stated by Stuart Hall (1992) consist of multiple and at times contrasting forms. When we look at the construction and reconstruction of identity, the field of education appears to have an inseparable link with it. Schools by promoting “collective sentiments” and “collective ideas” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 474), by its curricular and disciplinary practices, seeks to construct a form of collective/group identity which would serve the interest of the nation state. The present study interrogates the school ceremonies, symbols, curriculum, and the disciplinary mechanisms at work to gain insights on processes of identity formation in educational context. In the process the study examines the interplay of class, gender, and community (religious, linguistic, and ethnic) identity within school.

Identities are expressed by groups through assertion of certain cultural elements such as specific symbols and practices which include forms of dress, language, food habits, music, rituals which distinguish one group from another (Harrison, 1999). However, these are not essentially linked with the groups. From the literature about schooling, it is observed that it is often the culture, practices, and traits of those who hold power, that get promoted in schools. Pierre Bourdieu (1973) helps in examining how educational institutions school towards the reproduction of the existing power structure and relationship between classes and groups. This leads to the privileging and legitimating of certain identities and the overshadowing and marginalisation of others.

While the literature on school and reproduction of structures and relationships is rich, one identity that has received lesser attention is that of national identity. The construction of national identity is based on the ideals of a particular form of citizenry which is based

on the idea of an ‘imagined community’. The nation is considered as imagined, as the people residing in it will never know, meet, or hear from all their fellow nation mates, but still in their minds live the image of their communion (Anderson, 1983). This idea of a unified identity is complex in the sense that a particular group finds similarity among in-group members while they claim to differ from those who do not belong to the same group (Ross, 2007). Though we are living in the age of globalizations in terms of economic, social processes and cultures, yet the idea of a national identity continues to hold a strong appeal. The nation, which is itself a socially and imaginarily constructed identity and not natural, it often shapes the culture and everyday life of the individuals of the nation. In such a context, a particular culture is legitimate only if it meets the standards of the “preconceived sets of national characteristics” (Edensor, 2002, p.1).

Language plays a crucial role in building a unified national identity. Considering that the present study is based on the state of Assam, where linguistic and ethnic identity debates play a crucial role in asserting as well as determining one’s national identity, the present study examines how language identities are reproduced and negotiated in schools. The promotion of a certain language in schools establishes that particular language as the norm over other languages. It leads to the construction of differences in the social reality and produces social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1991; Philips, 2004; Grenfell, 2014). Drawing from existing literature, the study examines how legitimate identities, in terms of language, are constructed and received by students in school. It also focuses on the context of the marginalized “others”, and their relationship with the legitimate identity.

This construction of national identity and culture centered on the idea of a nation is always gendered in nature. It is gendered in the sense that while imagining the modern nation, many symbolic fictions have been adopted over time to give it a form. One such fiction is the imagination of the modern nation as an ancient goddess. This imagination of the nation as an ancient goddess gives a contrasting meaning to the idea of the nation: of imagining it as ancient and at the same time as modern (Ramaswamy, 2003). Women came to be considered as the embodiment of the nation and were entrusted the task of representing and maintaining the national culture. They were accorded the place of symbolic bodyguards of the nation (Sinha, 2000). Study of a gendered construction of a nation, in the context of schooling enables the understanding of the role that has been assigned to women. In the Indian context, women are entrusted the task of maintaining the tradition of the nation. This is achieved by attributing them with qualities that would

make them appear as self-sacrificing and devoid of sexuality (Chatterjee, 1997). Thus, the qualities and characteristics of middle-class femininity are exalted.

In the case of schooling too, it was observed that often students' identities are sought to be reproduced by focusing on the cultures of the dominant class. This influences the construction of gender identities as well. However, it must be remembered that there are multiple forms of masculinity and femininity. Amidst these multiplicities, a few traits are considered to be culturally dominant in forming ideas about students. These culturally dominant forms of gender are believed to be natural and ideal one in the specific context. Connel identified two of the dominant patterns as "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasized femininity," (Connel, 1985). The present study investigates the construction of the ideas of femininity basically within the space of schools.

The production and reproduction of linguistic, national and gender identities by schools are not simple. The official discourse of the school is contested and negotiated by students as class, ethnicity and religious community identities lead to the formation of separate and conflicting group identities among the students. Through it they practice the process of integration as well as boundary-making. In the process the authority of school is often challenged by the student population. This study seeks to examine all these processes in the context of school.

1.2. Statement of the problem

The study aims to unravel how schools are involved in the project of nation building, in terms of shaping students' identities through schooling. This objective of schools is widely understood to be fulfilled through its adherence to officially mandated school curricula including the school rituals and ceremonies, and by maintaining a disciplinary institution. The literature about schooling and its emphasis on dominant cultural symbols suggests that schooling process leads to the privileging and legitimating of class specific "gendered" identities and marginalization of others. Therefore, the study seeks to bring together insights gained from a critical understanding of the nation building process and studies of schooling process to make sense of the process of production, reproduction and contestation of group-identities in the specific context of schools in Assam.

The study assumes significance because of the specific history of regional consciousness that characterises the project of nationalism in Assam. In Assam two sets of issues

assume significance: firstly, regional consciousness based on linguistic identity and secondly, issues of belongingness to land and culture. Against a backdrop of tensions, around issues of belongingness to the land and its culture, and the vexed question of citizenship, this study attempts to examine the contemporary issues of identity politics centered on question of gender, class and community (language, religion and ethnicity) in the domain of school education.

This is sought to be achieved with a focus on the curricular practices in classrooms, assembly sessions, ceremonies, and disciplinary practices of the school to understand the dominant narrative of the nation and its desired subjects. The students in this study are considered as active agents negotiating with the dominant ideologies of the schools.

The present study is an attempt to understand how specific ideas about nation, gender and community are constructed, transmitted, and contested in the process of schooling.

1.3. Theoretical perspectives

To approach the study, certain theoretical perspectives were referred to. These are:

1.3.1. Reproduction and legitimation of dominant culture in education

The thesis examines the reproduction of class and dominant culture drawing from theoretical discussions in sociology of education. Bourdieu (1973) argued that it is necessary to study the laws that lead to the reproduction of structures of inequality at social, economic, and symbolic level. He was concerned with the way educational institutions worked towards reproduction of the existing power structure and symbolic relationship between classes and groups. This was accomplished through distribution of cultural capital among classes. Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital exist in three forms. These are: firstly, in “the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; secondly, in the objectified state, i.e. in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.) and thirdly, in the institutionalized state, i.e. as a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17).The official school culture recognises only the cultural capital of the dominant groups. Educational institutions presume similar cultural capital from everyone while at the same time not imparting what it seeks to demand. For example, linguistic

and other forms of cultural competence can be achieved only when ones' family or social setting transmits the dominant culture. Thus, by equating social hierarchies with hierarchy of "merit", the education system fulfills a function of legitimating which is necessary to maintain a "social order" and thus continue social reproduction of existing classes. Bourdieu was of the view that, as material capital can help in uplifting ones' material status, in the same way symbolic capital can help in uplifting one symbolic status. Language plays a role of symbolic capital for people, as the language of the dominant culture brings privilege to its speakers. Such languages are legitimated by the State and taught in schools in their specific forms. This pedagogic transmission of culture in educational institution can be grasped well only by those who are already familiar with the dispositions of the dominant culture. The reproduction of dominant culture pervades in various forms and it includes reproduction of dominant cultural ideals about gender roles and attributes (Bourdieu, 1986). Connel (1985) looks at the way schools engage in the reproduction of gender regimes. This gender regime is "defined as the pattern of practice that constructs various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff and students, orders them in terms of prestige and power, and constructs a sexual division of labor within this institution" (Connel, 1985, p. 42). This regime is not a permanent one and can be changed, but it has a very powerful influence on the students.

The dominant culture within a school cherishes and upholds the sexual division of labour within the family and in public life. Feminist scholarship helps us to understand why nations are often imagined as "domestic genealogies" by imagining them as a mother land or a fatherland (Sinha, 2004). This leads to inspire passion and devotion of its members to the idea of nation.

The school culture often projects such gender identities as natural and sets the pattern of being masculine or feminine appropriately. These dominant patterns are termed "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasized femininity", which, however, may not be the most common patterns in a setting (Connel, 1985).

1.3.2. Reproduction of gender and class relations

It was in the 1980s, with the works of Madeline Arnot that the issues of class and gender were woven together by using Bourdieu's ideas (Dillabough, 2006). The category of gender gets its meaning only when it is looked at as a duality, i.e., when the concepts of masculinity and femininity are considered to "exist in a relationship of complementarity and antithesis" (Arnot, 2002, p. 56). She looks at the way the social reproduction of the workforce within the separate domains, between public and private, as well as the dual relations between genders, gets reinforced within schools. This gender relationship is based on dualities, and this duality produces hierarchies upon which the idea of material and symbolic power is based. She describes the significance of decoding the "transmission of these cultural messages" (Arnot, 2002, p. 60) at schools, which is often based on the culture of the ruling classes. Such transmissions ensure not only the reproduction of a particular form of culture but also of the class structure itself.

According to Julie Bettie (2000), the reproduction of inequalities based on class identities was frequently equated with or misidentified as based on gender and race. Class remained invisible in a large majority of studies, and, therefore, she argued that identities can also be reproduced by regarding class as "performance and as performative" (Bettie, 2000, p. 28). Unlike gender and race, which were misinterpreted to be "natural and inevitable causal social forces" (Bettie, 2000, p. 28), class remained unnamed as there was an absence of cultural and political discourse on class. The performativity of class helps us to understand that class is determined often by economic and cultural resources, thus enabling one to identify with an inherited or chosen identity. This inequality based on class leads to the production of cultural performances that are reproduced as a consequence of one's habitus (Bettie, 2000).

Feminist scholars like Beverly Skeggs (2004) have further extended the interlinkages of class specific cultural practices of gender with a focus on femininity. Drawing on Bourdieu, she shows that femininity can be considered as a form of capital in a limited sense, when it is symbolically legitimated. However, it often becomes a form of symbolic violence in the cultural field. By using this concept of symbolic violence, different "types of femininities and different values attached to it", femininity can be analysed (Skeggs, 2004, p. 24). She argues that femininity is ambivalent and cannot be considered as a defined entity. It is this ambivalence that is at the core of many types of

gender and sexuality reproduction. This form of gender is present everywhere and therefore cannot be considered to be purely performative or pre-reflexive. As a result, the contradictions and ambiguities that exist between genders, as well as between gender and sexuality, cannot be discussed simply as habit (Skeggs, 2004).

Deane Reay (2010) has demonstrated how formation of group identities among students at school are guided by their “class, ethnicity, emergent sexuality” and not dependent on their individual choices (Reay, 2010, p.163). Despite the educational success stories of girls, hierarchies of class, race and gender operated in complex ways at schools which marginalised working-class, non-white, and girl students. She looks at the intersections of learner identity and social identity in shaping identities among students in schools.

1.3.3. Theories of resistance and school culture

Paul Willis (1977) in his seminal ethnographic account of a group of working-class boys demonstrates how the dominant symbols associated with school are challenged and mocked at by the students. The lads’ practice and beliefs showed resistance to the discipline enforced by the school system, which he termed as “counter-culture”. It was manifested in various expressions, acts of language and style considered inappropriate as per the dominant culture of the school.

Giroux (1983) critiques the existing theories of reproduction as well as resistance and says that, resistance, i.e., oppositional behaviour need not always have “radical significance” and resistance of any form must be understood from the specific historic context to identify the cause and form of resistance. Resistance may have varied meanings and students’ oppositional behaviour cannot always be equated with opposition to the dominant school culture. Students may engage in complex ways and respond to the connection between their own experiences and structures of domination and constraint. “The pedagogical value of resistance lies, in part, in the connections it makes between structure and human agency on the one hand and culture and the process of self-formation on the other” (Giroux, 1983, p. 56).

McRobbie (1990) extends the understanding of working-class resistance to understand production of working-class femininities. The school is seen as an institution to reproduce the sexual division of labour according to the dominant class ideology. Her study reflects that the working-class girls opposed the disciplinary mechanisms and

authority structure of the school, but were in agreement with the idea of the traditional female roles, femininity and motherhood. They were able to relate themselves more with the ideas of femininities that had affinity with motherhood instead of what they could learn in their schools. The literature reveals processes of reproduction of class, race, gender, and linguistic identities in and through education.

However there remains a gap in literature regarding reproduction of national identity as a form of community identity. This reproduction of national identity is important in the South Asian context and specially in the context of Assam because women in these regions have often shouldered the burden of culturally representing the nation through their conduct, practice and bodily dispositions. Thus, based on the above theoretical framework and readings, I came up with the following objectives and research questions.

1.4. Objectives and research questions

For the purpose of the study, a few objectives and research questions were formulated based on the above readings which have helped to guide and shape the course of the research.

1.4.1. Objectives

The present research has been done with the following objectives:

- 1) To explore the formation and reproduction of group-identities pertaining to the idea of nation (*dex*) and community (*jati*) in and through school with special reference to Assam
- 2) To examine the role of school-specific curricular, ceremonial, and disciplinary practices in the formation of group-based identities among students and teachers
- 3) To examine how gender identities are constructed, reinforced, and contested at school, and how these are linked with identities of class, community, and nation
- 4) To examine the pattern and nature of resistance against the dominant school culture

1.4.2. Research questions

- a) What are the key symbols of nation celebrated in the schools?
- b) To what extent are these shaped by the ideals and symbols of nationalism at national and regional level?
- c) What are the events and ceremonies (daily and annual) through which the idea of nation and community are celebrated in the schools of Assam?
- d) Are these processes of celebrations similar in government and private funded schools?

- e) What are the gender dimensions of these processes?
- f) What are the normative ideals of students that are constructed and projected in schools and through what processes? Are they gendered in nature?
- g) What is the role of teachers in these processes?
- h) How do students articulate ideas about nation, community, religion, and language in the context of Assam?
- i) How do they engage with notions of masculinity and femininity? Do they accept the dominant ideals or question the same?
- j) Do students reflect on the dominant culture of the school? If yes, in what ways?

1.5. Literature review

Study of literature on a few selected themes has helped to identify the gaps in literature and plan the methodology of this study.

1.5.1. Nation and nationalism

Ernest Renan (1882) in his lecture, *What is a Nation?* describes the nation as a soul, a spiritual principle and this principle is constituted of two things – one lies in the past, in the possession of common memories; and the other lies in the present, in the consent to live together. He mentions that in the case of memories, it is the shared grief and suffering that are of more value than joy, as they impose duties and require a common effort. Thus, the feeling of the sacrifice that has been made in the past and of those that one is ready to make in the future constitutes the large - scale solidarity of the nation. He negates the idea that nation is formed or people are bound together by race, or by language, or religion, or course of river or by the direction taken by mountain chain. A nation is formed, according to him by the collective will and consciousness of sane and kind-hearted people residing there willingly and making sacrifices for the advantage of the community.

Benedict Anderson (1983) in his book *Imagined Communities*, unlike Renan tries to give the definition of nation an anthropological spirit as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”. The nation is considered as imagined as the people residing in it will never know, meet or hear from their fellow nation mates, but still in their minds lives the image of their communion. Communities are thus to be distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined. The nation is also considered as limited, as the largest

of the nation has its boundaries, and does not connect with the whole of mankind but is limited in its connection to its boundaries. Sovereign, because of the way the concept of nation was born, breaking out from the clutches of the hierarchical dynastic realm and legitimacy of the divinely ordained, to being free above all, but God. The nation is finally imagined as an imagined community because of the comradeship that exists between all section of the people residing in it, willing to even sacrifice their lives for the sake of the nation, despite knowing that inequality and exploitation prevails among the sections of the people in general. The invention of print-capitalism made people think about themselves and also relate themselves with others, creating the possibility of a new form of imagined community.

Michael Billig (1995) in his book *Banal Nationalism* says that the moral order of the modern times has become the order of the nations. In an attempt to maintain this order sacrifices are made and then victories are counted and not victims. There is an aura around the concept of nationhood and is so profound that the rape of a motherland is considered far more serious than the rape of actual mothers. Unlike Anderson, who said that modern nations are free except under God, Billig says that the order of the nations is not designed to serve God, but God is to serve the order. In the academic and popular textbooks, nationalism is considered to be located in the periphery, practiced by the separatists associated with the aim of creating new states or with extreme right-wing politics. It is believed to be absent in the centre which is the space of sensible politicians, and thus nationalism is seen at the centre as a property of “others” and not of “us”.

And even if it occurs in the centre sometimes, it is considered to occur only in certain particular occasion and then again, the everyday affairs of daily life are continued as usual. Billig says that in recent times the ideological habits by which one nation is reproduced as a nation are unnamed and therefore remains hidden. Billig has coined the term “Banal Nationalism” to describe this situation that enables the established nations of the west to be reproduced.

1.5.1.1 Nation and gender in South Asia

Nation is “invented” through various practices and here the term “invention” is considered in the sense of fabrication and in the sense of recombination of existing elements that helps in the formation of national communities. Feminist scholarship look at this invented character of the nation in the context where the discourse of gender is

used to represent the nation. Women who are considered as “symbolic border guards” (Armstrong, as cited in Davis, 1997) of culture, therefore, cannot be marginalized from the cultural analysis of the nation. This is because, though women have been marginalized in the public domain, yet in the nationalist discourse they are considered as the symbol of the national culture (Sinha, 2004). Women are made to be the representatives of particular codes of style of dress and behaviour. Gender symbols specifically play a significant role in this. The importance of women's culturally 'appropriate behavior' gains special significance in 'multicultural societies (Davis, 1993).

In the construction of the nation, however, certain men and women are excluded from political representation, as certain forms of femininity and masculinity become the normative ideals. However, it must be noted that the construction of nation in gendered terms is not only based on difference of women from men, but also differences among women belonging to different backgrounds as well. Women of the third-world countries are entrusted more to represent the cultural aspect of the nation and they are supposed to embody the qualities of a “modern yet modest” outlook which would symbolize the balance between tradition and modernity (Sinha, 2004).

Partha Chatterjee (1997) argues that nationalism separates the domain of culture in two ways, the material and the spiritual. During colonial period, the nationalist leaders maintained that in order to achieve independence and power, they must develop themselves materially and at the same time preserve their spiritual essence. This distinction in the discourse of nationalism was further divided into two factions, the outer and the inner domain. The outer domain, i.e., the world was the place of material interests and it was the domain of men, whereas the inner domain, i.e., the home was the place of the spiritual sphere, which is the domain of women, and it must be protected from the profane activities of the material world. Women who were the carriers of tradition were entrusted with the responsibility to preserve this sacred space, by attributing qualities which would make them appear as the mother of the nation as self-sacrificing and devoid of sexuality, as sexuality is considered a threat.

Partha Chatterjee (2018) argues that the representation of the nation through women was achieved through the principle of discipline, achieved as a form of normalization through various institutions. This normalization was defined as the difference in the normative

political spaces where this normalization thrives and which had led to the continuity of patriarchal traditions in the society must be analysed.

In South Asian context, Ramaswamy (2007) argues that the modern nation needed many symbolic fictions to sustain itself over time and one such fiction is the imagination of the modern nation as an ancient goddess. This goddess who represents timeless values and cherished ideals arouses adoration and at the same time command reverence from her citizen – devotees. Thus, a contradiction appears in imagining the nation as ancient and at the same time as modern. In this respect, she examined how two deities, *Tamilttay* (Mother Tamil) and *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) helps in the creation of a modern construct of the nation. Here it is important to understand the contest in imagination of the nation when it is viewed from the southern region. However, there are fewer studies that situate these debates in Assam which has been a major site of examination of nation-building projects particularly after the Assam movement in post-independence era.

1.5.1.2 The nation and the region

Amalendu Guha (1980) argues that there are various ways of interpreting the question of national identity in the context of Assam movement. Gail Omvedt (1976) analyses it from the perspective of fundamental class/national characteristics of the society and the movement, and express that the people feared that the cultural-national identity may be swept away by the Bengali influx. Sanjib Baruah (1980), highlighted that the notion of Assamese sub-nationalism is based on the threats from the influx of Bengali speaking migrants. Tilottama Misra (1980) on the other hand, provided an economic rationale to the struggle and relates it to be a result of a reaction against the domination of a small nationality by the rest of India. Guha (1980) writes that nationalism in India ever since its inception has been developing at two levels - one at the all-India level which is based on Pan-Indian cultural homogeneities and an anti-imperialism that is shared; the other was based on regional-cultural homogeneities. Both the nationalisms are found to be intertwined. Traditionally an average Indian identifies with both the nationalisms. Like an average Indian, an average Assamese person is aware of both their regional and Indian identities. This is explained with the help of an example citing Madhav Dev, a 16th century Vaishnava saint of Assam, who wrote in a verse that he was proud of his birth in Bharata and this fact is often invoked as a symbol of the later identity (Guha, 1980).

Bhupen Sarmah (2017) is of the view that the political integration of the northeast region with mainland India was one of the major challenges before India as a nation-state. It is argued by many that the political and developmental steps taken by the Indian state to integrate the region led to the emergence of conflicts of different forms in the region. But he also identified the colonial roots of such conflicts. With the Burmese invasions of Assam and the signing of the Yandaboo treaty in 1826 the state of Assam was brought under the British rule. The colonial intervention brought significant internal changes in the realm of social, cultural, political and economic life of the people staying in the region. This was followed by strong antagonism of the influx of immigrants from East Bengal. These material relations continued to define the Assamese nationalist mobilisations which developed during the Indian independence struggle. The Assam movement in the 1980s had certain implications that set the trend for the current happenings in the region. One of the fallouts has been that it divided the people on the basis of unresolved citizenship leading to the shaping of communalism as a political reality (Sarmah, 2017). As the movement focused on foreigners, it was defined more in terms of language and region of origin, despite that the religious identity was always an important factor in the everyday discourse of exclusion faced by the Muslims of Bengal origin (Ibid).

1.5.1.3 Language, religion, and identity-politics in Assam

The questions surrounding linguistic identity have been playing a fundamental role in the political, social, as well as everyday life of the people of Assam. There have been conflicts and political mobilizations on these questions and these dates back to colonial period.

The decision of the British in 1836 to establish Bengali as the official language of Assam, replacing Assamese, led to the growth of dissension over it mainly among the Assamese middle class, and ultimately, Assamese as the official language was restored in 1873. This question of official language left a form of bitterness historically in the relationship between Assamese and Bengalis in Assam. The Bengali Hindus were perceived as a threat to the Assamese culture and identity. However, from the 1920s, a growing influx of people from neighboring East Bengal led to serious concerns for the people and led to dividing the immigrants on the basis of their date of arrival to India (Mishra, 1999).

The state has witnessed immigrations in different phases and at different times. The issue of immigration has historically often been used to define the Assamese community as the majority community among the indigenous population of Assam. The question of who is indigenous to the land of Assam has become an issue that is highly contested in recent times. The binary between “indigenous” and “immigrant” guides identity construction in Assam. The term “immigrant” is used to define those people who came to Assam in the 19th century after the advent of the British (Sharma, 2012). The issue of immigration has affected language identities too. The debate over the official language in Assam has been one of the fundamental markers of identity politics in Assam. However, the burden of the politics of indigeneity has most often been faced by the Muslims of Bengal origin.

The Muslims in Assam constitute a heterogenous group. The Muslims who came to Assam in different phases of the 19th and 20th century after the British occupation of Assam and settled predominantly in the char areas of lower and middle Assam are known as Bengal origin Muslims. These Muslims of Bengal origin were identified by eminent Assamese writers using terms like *Na-Axamiya* or *Neo-Axamiya* (Ahmed, 2020). These people primarily speak a dialect that is a mixture of variety of standard languages, such as, “Bengali, Assamese, Arabic, Urdu and other languages” (Hossain, 2018, p.57, as cited in Kumar, 2022, p.63). Over the years they have undergone the process of “asamiyasation” (Guha, 1984, p.59), which means that they have been assimilated into the traditions, cultural symbols of the dominant culture of Assam. It created an ambivalent position for them in the Assamese society. While the process of assimilation is desired and appreciated by a section of Assamese speaking population but the alleged influx of people creates a fear in their minds as they are scared of losing their dominant status. This fear of being outnumbered has been playing a role in the identity politics of Assam (Guha, 1984). Thus, the fear of being outnumbered led the “Asamiya” ruling class, mainly the middle-class to introduce the process of asamiyasation. Some scholars argue that the process of assimilation through asamiyasation was not democratic and led to the weakening of the “Asamiya” nationalism formation process (Hussain, 1993). However, a large section of them recognized Assamese as their mother-tongue in census. This was in contrast to the Bengali Hindu immigrants who recognize Bengali as their mother-tongue. However, speaking and recognizing Assamese as their mother-tongue by the East-Bengal origin people was not able “to wash off the stigma of being immigrants” of these people (Saikia, 2021, p.13).

For some scholars, the chauvinist sentiments were responsible for the Assam Movement of 1979-1985, while others believe that it sought to create a unified Assamese identity (Guha, 1980; Baruah, 1981). This movement also defined what a foreigner meant in Assam's context. It led to a change of identification of foreigners from "those who are from outside Assam" to "those who are from outside India." (Baruah, as cited in Murshid, 2016, 595). Thus, instead of getting recognized as Axamiya, they were stigmatized and derogated as "Pamua," "Charua," "Miya," "Mymensinghia", etc. (Ahmed, 2020, as cited in Kumar, 2022). They are despised by most of the people of Assam, including the "Khilonjia" (indigenous) Muslims as the "unwanted other" (Saikia, 2021, p.13). In recent years the term "Miya" has been adopted by a section of intellectuals and literati among them. However, they do not constitute a homogenous group and sometimes, people identify themselves with their place of origin. They speak different dialects and its difference from the standard Bengali makes it unique (Nath, 2021). "This term "Miya" is not a religious or communal term per se but today, in Assam, it has come to be associated exclusively with the Bengal-origin Muslims" (Hossain, 2018, p.38). Though *Miya* is an address of respect the term took on a derogatory connotation in Assam, suggesting illegal entry and usurpation of legitimate rights of the sons of the soil (Goswami 2010, p.4). This contestation over *Miya* identity took a new turn in recent times when some young poets started asserting this stigmatized identity (Kumar, 2022).

1.5.2. Nation, education and gender in India

The question of women's education in India has been a field of contestation. It has often been framed through questions of what constitutes women's education, how women should be educated, and what form of education should be provided to women. In colonial discourse, Indian women were constructed as "uneducated" and oppressed, evoking a nationalist response to the same (Sinha, 2000). From nationalist perspective, the solution was found in the reformation of women – that the women of the nation must be educated if India had to catch up with the west in terms of material achievements. Women's education was seen then, not just as an end, but as a means to an end for the betterment of the family, community and nation (Bhog, 2002). The question of the "new women", who was well educated enough to be the perfect companion for her husband, and mother for her child, was formulated as a means of coping with change (Chatterjee, 1997). Thus, we can see how the issue of women's education came to be associated with

the issue of nationalism and community identity. It was in the field of education primarily that the task for the construction of this “new women” was emphasised upon. This new woman who was adorned with all the qualities of the culturally superior women connecting the home and the world was distinguished from the western women, as well as from the “classicized” Indian tradition (Ibid). Geraldine Forbes (1996) in her article, *Education for Women* describes about the course of the history and pattern of women’s education in India and brings into light certain women who had passionate desire to learn to read. She discusses about the forms of education for women in India over the years. There are some accounts of education in the vernacular language after the arrival of the missionaries at the scene. The missionary education included teaching of household work to women. Later on, we find accounts of women like Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, the founder of the Sarada Sadan in Bombay and Poona; Mataji Tapaswini, the founder of the Mahakali Pathsala of Calcutta and D.K. Karve in Poona, who had been able to master the benefits of women’s education and proved to be pioneer of women’s education in their own right.

Uma Chakravarti (2012) in her work points out how schools help in creating the kind of women as required by the nation to maintain its integrity and honour. In this discourse, women, can be made to represent the nation only through proper education. The school is the main arena for the creation and normalisation of these specific sets of values, norms and ideals. The nation in spite of its claims of being equal is in fact the property of men. It is men who claim the prerogative of nation and then the obligations are left to be followed by women. Women are considered to be the reproducer of not only the sons of the soil, but also of tradition and modernity of the nation which must also be nurtured and maintained by women themselves.

In the present times, education for women basically means making them modern, to go along with the wave of modernity. This idea of educating women goes back to the pre – independence times, where women were required to be educated so as to fulfill the role of the mother and reproduce family, class and caste. At another level there was an emphasis on women’s education as literacy was considered to lead to declining fertility rates.

Veronique Benei (2007) in her book talks about the manufacturing and shaping of nationalism and the role that school plays in it in a banal manner. Schooling over the

years has been operating as a site of crystallisation of identity, especially linguistic and gendered identities, despite its claims of producing homogenous patriotic citizens.

In this respect she has highlighted the idea of the sensory and looks at the process through which emotions and body acts together to produce the idea of nation in the minds of the students. She focuses on the daily rituals that take place in schools which leads to the creation of a sense of collective identity, of a sense of belonging to the nation. She mentions the daily singing during morning assemblies, which requires the students to perform synchronizing their bodily movement as well as their senses. She identifies a "homology between school and temple" (Benei, 2007, p.48) and how school continues to draw from sacred ideas.

She also looks at the ways in which in school the idea of mother India is re-created as an integral part of daily school life. She brings forward the ways in which the concept of motherhood is linked with that of the nation, and girls in school are projected as mother goddesses. The imposition of the gendering process in educational institutions is mentioned through the amalgamation of the influence of regional and national identities within the school space.

In the context of Maharashtra, there seems to be a joint production of nation and locality, but Maharashtrian citizenship "predetermines and encompasses that of Indian citizenship" (Benei, 2007, p.136).

She also looks at the process by which community identity is produced through schooling. The production of a national community also leads to the notion of "minority" and "dominant" communities and in the sphere of schooling through the production or community identity, members of both the mentioned communities faces the sociological reality.

Shalini Advani (2010) through an analysis of the English language curriculum in schools presents a narrative that would help us to understand how the nation is expected to be imagined and perceived by the students. In the curricula, the nation is usually presented as a homogenous entity, pan-Indian identity, overshadowing all the differences that might exist at the regional level or in terms of caste, class, and other differences. The creation of a homogenous national identity needs the erasure of the voice of dissent, of marginalized sections and even when at times they are incorporated and mentioned, the

differences that exist between various communities are silenced to present the nation as a collective, homogenous identity.

She also talks about gender in the textbooks and the portrayal of women. Though there were changes in the expectation of the role of a woman, the structural construction of women as the representative of the nation, in the public as well as the private sphere remained strong. The complexities that surround women were brushed off and women were presented often as the normative middle-class women. Thus, Advani argues how through textbooks the idea of Indian national identity and an Indian woman was shaped, by diminishing and marginalizing the differences and multiple layers of identity.

Nandini Manjrekar (2011) looks at the construction of the ideal Hindu girl as prescribed by the *Balika Shikshan*, published by the Vidya Bharti board. Through analysis of this text, the relationship of the Hindu girl with that of the ideal Hindu women in accordance to RSS situating her in the context of Hindutva in the family, community and nation can be understood. The text tries to bring about a Hindu consciousness among the child, especially the girl-child, as much importance is given to the child considering the fact that they will be the protector of the family and culture one day. The fear of cultural pollution from media and western ideas and the need to protect the family as an institution has led to the development of the *balika shikshan* to educate girls about their roles in maintaining the family and culture by providing them life skills and life style education. It aims to develop the natural role of women in the family. Education for girls is emphasized and is considered meaningful as long as girls have an interest in the home. A girl needs to control her emotions and instill values so she can impart such values to her children later on. The aspect of health, home management and cultural legacy are emphasized and taught. It also teaches to restrict oneself from market-driven forces and use less of western products, not only because it profits the multinational foreign companies but also because it threatens the Hindu nation.

1.5.2.1. Gender and education in Assam

In the context of Assam, Aparna Mahanta (2008) examined how women's education in Assam shaped up between nineteenth and early twentieth century. The missionaries started girls' schools for some but the curriculum remained based on learning of Bible and other scriptures in their vernacular language. It also included lessons on weaving, spinning, and stitching of ordinary clothes considered necessary for girls to be able to be

a suitable wife. For the elite, similar model of education was adopted at a more individual level but the ultimate motive of this education was for the girl to be the perfect wife for her husband, who would be able to manage the household and be a good companion.

In her account we find that the town of Nagaon thrived as the centre of women's education in Assam. In the late nineteenth century few schools in different districts of the state were set up by the government efforts. An analysis of literary magazines of the period reveals the contours of intense debates regarding the education of women, between the liberals and the conservatives. Fear of being contaminated by western ideas and intermingling of gender and caste caused many to oppose women's education. There was also the fear that women would be diverted from their wifely attributes and may also prefer boys who were more advanced than Assamese boys. In the twentieth century, the role of middle-class women was constructed differently. This new woman was supposed to fulfill the role of mother and an ideal companion and assist him in fulfilling his social, spiritual and political duties at the national front. However, the fear of women being influenced by western education continued to haunt the Assamese society and a need was felt to separate women's education from that of men. This was done so that women would not lose their “feminine” nature. The philosophy of Gandhi was also welcomed by the people of Assam as though it connected women with outer space for the nationalist cause, yet the basic role of women as the representative of the house and men of the outer affairs remained unchanged (Mahanta, 2008).

Another way of examining women's education in Assam was through the women's organization *mahila xamitis* of the state in 1926 under the leadership of Chandraprova Saikiani. She saw education as a means to uplift the subordinate condition of women in society through material and political interventions. This was different from the dominant ideas about education which were shared by both the government and the missions on the type of education and its role in the service industry (Medhi, 2013). However, despite such an education system, the women receiving education had their own agency and could still claim access to the emerging public space precisely in opposition to or selective appropriation of her educational goals.

In an article written on the life of Chandraprabha Saikiani, Hemjyoti Medhi (2014) has highlighted the importance that Saikiani gave to women's education. Saikiani, who was

the founding secretary of the Axom Mahila Samiti (Assam women's association) has been celebrated as a feminist icon in Assam since the late 1990s. She also gave prime importance to education. According to her education is the source of life, the absence of which would not let the *jati* to keep its existence. She believed that with freedom every nation demands social reform. This freedom of a nation can be achieved when there is freedom of education, social reform and craft/industry. She advocated for women's education and argued that the country could have progressed ten times more if women were educated too.

In many ways the history of Assam and that of building national identity consciousness both as Indian and as Assamese have been deeply connected with the issue of women's education. Saikiani was also associated with the founding of early *mahila samitis* at Tezpur and Nagaon.

Hemjyoti Medhi (2010) talks about the importance given to *aideo* in the construction of a new Assamese women identity. She looked at it to understand the role played by gender in imagining community identity in 19th and 20th century Assam. This *aideo* encompasses the characteristics of middle-class respectability. She was dressed in a domestic discourse in *sador mekhela* to suit local needs. She became a marker of Assamese women as contrast to the *dangoriya* (a man of high social status) ideal and as opposed to the Bengali Bhadramahila. This *aideo* was "dressed in *sador mekhela*, distinct from the sari-clad Bengali women, *parbatia* and *Kiratajati* (hill and tribal) women, and the *coolioni* (female coolie)" (Medhi, 2021, p.17). Thus, conceptualizing Assamese women identity in relation to other communities was important to the dressing of the *aideo*.

1.6. Nagaon: The field

The district of Nagaon is situated in central Assam to the south of the Brahmaputra River at latitude between 25'45 to 26'45 and longitude between 91'50 and 93'20. To the north of the district, as mentioned in the Nagaon administration official website, lie Sonitpur district and the Brahmaputra River, its south is bounded by West Karbi Anglong, Hojai and Dima Hasao, to the east it shares boundary with East Karbi Anglong and Golaghat and to its west is the Morigaon district of Assam.

The district got its name after the accession of the region by the Ahoms. One thousand paiks¹ were settled there and this newly organized district came to be known as Nagaon (Na, means new and Gaon, means village, collectively meaning ‘new village’) source (Saikia, 2017). One of the distinctions of the district is that it holds the birthplace of Srimanta Sankardeva, the Vaishnava saint of Assam. Sankardeva was born in Alipukhuri-Bordowa area of Nagaon in the year 1449 and later went on to establish his first ever Kirtanghar (prayer hall) in the year 1468 in the area known as Sri Sri Batadravathan. In the year 1832, Nagaon was carved out as a separate administrative unit under British rule, with its first headquarter at Purani gudam in 1883. Finally in the year 1839, the British established their headquarters in Nagaon town. In the year 1893, it became a municipality, as mentioned in the Nagaon district website.

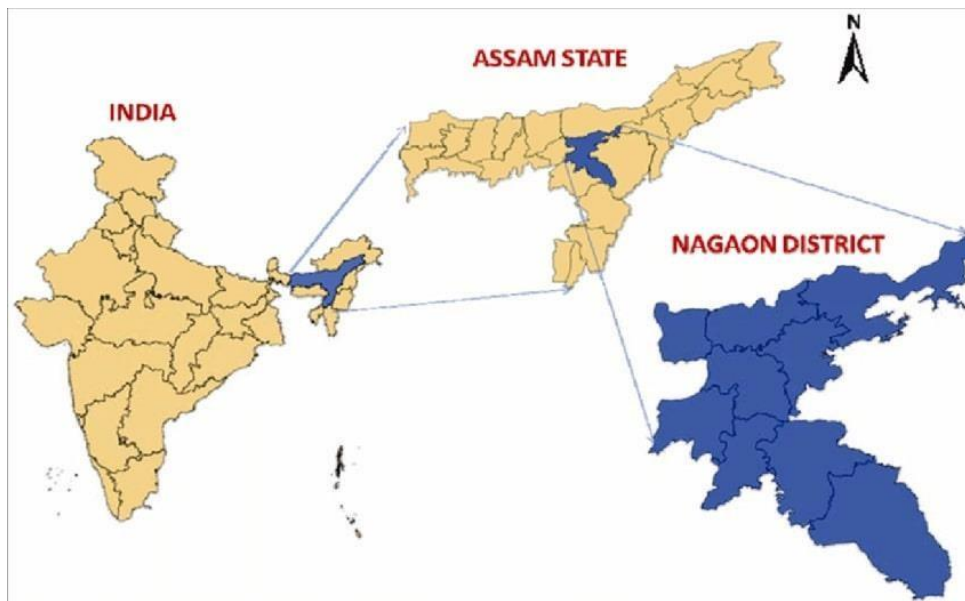
Figure 1: Location of Nagaon district in Assam



Source: Maps of India

¹ Male members between the age group of sixteen to fifty in the Ahom kingdom who were not included under priest, noble, high caste or slave

Figure 2: Map of Nagaon district



Source: Indian maps online

The district of Nagaon according to the 2011 census has a total population of 2,823,768. Muslims constitute the majority religion here at 55.36%. The presence of Muslims in this area can be traced back to the 1570s. During the Ahom rule, initially many people were brought to provide service in various ways to the Ahom officers and with it the settlement of Muslims in this area started. The attack of the Manas also forced many Muslim people to flee and settle in this space. Later during the British times, people from East Bengal settled here in great numbers and some were even recruited by the British to construct railway tracts in this area. During the time of 1883-1885, the decision of chief ayukta, Charles Elliot to bring peasants from East Bengal to Assam led to the huge influx of population till India's independence. In this way, a large part of the undivided Nagaon became a place of settlement for many East-Bengal Muslims (Saikia, 2017).

Nagaon town is also significant from the perspective of education, specially the education of women because, during the pre-colonial times, it played a key role as a hub of women's education. Many notable personalities of Assam like Gunabhiram Barua and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, played a key role in the development of education for women while in Nagaon. Barua, while posted in Nagaon, encouraged women to write in his monthly literary journal named Assam Bandhu (friend). Moreover, the presence of Christian missionaries in the town also shaped the growth of women's education in a specific way. Dr. Miles Bronson setup his co-educational institution for orphans and the

Mission school in the year 1846 by Miles Bronson. According some accounts, there was a strong influence of the Brahma Samaj in the town as well. One of the remarkable Sanskrit scholars and feminist Pandita Ramabai who worked for women education visited Nagaon and engaged in learned debates with the pundits. (Mahanta, 2008). It also has the third oldest government school in Assam, a government boys' higher secondary school, established in the year 1865. Examples of schools opened by different local communities can be also be found in Alitangani, an area near Nagaon town where immigrant Muslims set up a primary school in 1902. It became the first high school in the Alitangani area in 1928 (Nath, 2021).

1.6.1. Schools in Nagaon

After visiting about ten schools of various types in Nagaon based on their organisational and cultural affiliations, medium of instruction, and source of funding; one government vernacular (Assamese) medium school was selected as the main field site. This school caters to a mixed population of lower and lower-middle class students with a Muslim majority. Another private vernacular (Assamese) medium school was selected to complement the study as a supplementary site which mainly caters to lower-middle class and exclusively Hindu students. The school is committed to a specific vision of nationalism. The selection of the two diverse schools helped in understanding the dynamics of identity construction in the specific context of Assam.

1.7. Methods

To gain access to the schools initially a formal letter of introduction was produced before the school administration. All other participants were also duly informed about my identity as a doctoral student at Tezpur university. Thereafter, the objectives of my study and the nature of the information needed were explained to the school principal, teachers and students. They were assured that the data collected from the participants, their personal details as well as the identity of the school would be anonymised. The confidentiality of the data in processing and report writing was maintained.

A qualitative framework was adopted as it helped the researcher to engage with the study of group identities, which were found to be quite flexible and overlapping. The primary sources of the study were the teachers and students of the school. The focus was on gaining insights into students' perspectives and teachers' views on students. The techniques of data collection involved observation of school life through intermittent

visits for three academic calendar years from 2018-2020. The students of Class VIII, of both the schools were considered specifically for the study. Exposure to different supplementary texts (in private schools), orientation programmes, and the minimum load on students towards final examination as compared to higher classes was the reason behind selecting this class of students. The total number of students in the schools in the year 2017-18 were – (i) 471 in the government school where students were from class VI to X. (ii) 729 in the private school where the school had classes from KG I to class X. The students of class VIII in the government school were 63 and in the private school were 78. Out of that, a total of thirty-five in-depth interviews were carried out among the students in each school. The students of class VIII of both the schools were distributed questionnaires to understand their social and economic background. Later the selection of the key participants for the study (35 students) was done initially by looking at the answers to the questionnaires and later as the researcher got introduced to the students at a personal level, the students were selected through purposive sampling based on their ethnic, gender, religious, and linguistic identities. A uniform representation in terms of identity as well as numerical strength was sought to be maintained in selecting the participants in both the schools. The selection was also guided by the regularity of the participants to the school.

Informal conversational interviews were undertaken in general during school festivals and on the school grounds during the recess period. This allowed the researcher to associate with the participants at a more informal level and to gain their trust and friendship. Classroom situations in the presence and absence of teachers were observed. The study organized four focus group discussions with teachers and students on specified issues such as dress, practice of heteronormativity. I visited fourteen students in their homes. Apart from that, telephonic interviews were undertaken (Sept-Nov, 2020) during the Covid lockdown. This mode of primary data collection technique was supplemented by analyses of visual images on display, written and published materials collected from both the schools such as the academic calendar, prayer book cum diary, school magazines, periodicals and other materials published by Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and Sishu Siksha Samiti (SSS) textbooks.

1.7.1 Researcher's position

The researcher was aware of her social position vis-à-vis the participants in the field site. In both the schools, the social and educational background of the researcher as a middle-

class University graduate from caste-Hindu Assamese background helped in getting along with the teachers at both the schools. My religious identity was important in gaining access to the private school.

The students were in Class VII in 2018 when I was introduced to them by the school administration as a *baideu* (literally elder sister, it is a word used as a form of respect for women in Assam as well as to address female teachers at school). During the initial phase, the interactions with students took place only during the class hours that I was allotted when any teacher was absent. During this time, I was able to connect with the students and observe their sitting preferences. The students were under the impression that I was a new teacher of the school or as someone who is from outside. Gradually and after long sessions of interactions in different settings outside the classroom, sometimes in their homes, they realized I was not a teacher at the school or one of the authorities and became comfortable. Learning the fact that I was a student like them made them accept me and relate with me more. They were curious to know about my grades at college. The girls, unlike the boys, were more open since the beginning. Being of similar sex, the girls could be friendlier and were able to relate more. However, to gain access to their friendship group and individually in general, it was necessary to know about their interests which helped me in understanding them better. The gender difference initially made most of the boys shy to interact with me or made them consider me similar to the girls of their class. To overcome that barrier, initially, I tried to know about their means of entertainment, interests and hobbies. My bonding with them also took place over discussions of mobile games, GK quiz, cricket, movies and TV serials, TikTok, and sports.

1.8. Organization of the thesis

The thesis has six chapters in total, where the first chapter introduces the topic under study, research objectives and research questions, which helps to navigate the study. Along with that it also comprises the methodology adopted, theoretical frameworks, literature review and a summary of the chapters.

The second chapter introduces the field under study, by describing the significance of selecting the particular school as the site for the study and describing its population in detail. It then goes on to provide a detailed description of two events of national and regional importance celebrated in the school and show how these help in developing a

moral community in the school based on gendered characteristics. The dominant culture practiced in the school is looked at in this chapter that helps to bring about the class, ethnic, gender and religious identity of the students.

The third chapter concerns the issue of the formation of group identity among the students pertaining to language and community affiliations. In this chapter, an account of the school's official language endorsement is presented along with variance in its reception by the students. The construction of student identity is based on the hierarchy of language, and their identification with a community and the place is examined against the backdrop of the schools' standardization and official endorsement of a particular language.

In the next chapter, the disciplinary mechanism adopted by the schools is discussed, ranging from dress code to behavioural actions and performances. The heteronormative lens applied by the schools paves the way for various gendered patterns of actions to be followed by the students. This chapter also discusses the modes of resistance adopted by the students against these disciplinary mechanisms.

The fifth chapter presents an account of a private vernacular medium school and examines the school curricula within the context of nation, region and gender identity. It reveals the oscillating and hierarchical relationship between the nation and the region in terms of language, cultural and political symbols. This chapter also discusses the disciplinary mechanisms within the school that leads to the construction of class-based gendered identities.

The last chapter summarises the key findings of the thesis and highlights the major insights gained from the study. I hope it would contribute to the existing knowledge on school education and youth studies in the context of Assam, particularly in the field of formation of gendered identity, language legitimation, and nation building projects in school.