

CHAPTER 2

NATION, REGION AND GENDER IN AN ASSAMESE MEDIUM GOVERNMENT SCHOOL

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the prime site of field study, i.e. the government school, its teachers, and its students. It seeks to gain an understanding of the dominant culture in a government school by examining some of the most important school specific daily and annual events and rituals. The ceremonies celebrated in the school have been discussed with special focus on those events that explain the reproduction of dominant group identities.

2.2 Historical background

The government school under study was established in the year 1916 under the British rule. It is one of the oldest schools of Assam and the third oldest in Nagaon district. The school came into existence, as per Dawsonian (2016), the school magazine, when a few citizens of the locality felt the need for another vernacular medium school in Nagaon for the 'Assamese' community. This is because prior to the establishment of this school, there were only two vernacular medium schools in the then undivided Nagaon district. According to the school magazine, the then-District Commissioner James Alexander Dawson granted the people's request to use a plot of land in Itachali to build the school. Alexander Dawson was associated with many social activities as well as educational projects of the district. As a mark of respect and gratitude, the people of Nagaon named the school after him. The school was initially started with just the Middle Primary (M.P.) level and upgraded to the High School (H.S.) level in the year 1930. At present the school has classes from Class VI to XII.

2.3 Location and the school population

The school is located in an urban area and is situated in the urban block of Nagaon district. It has a large campus, bounded by walls on all sides and a large iron gate at the entrance. There is only one entrance to the school. On entering the school campus, to the right is the principal's room, next to it is the office room and the staff common room.

The common room is a large room where all the teachers sit together. There are a total of eleven classrooms for the high school section. The school also has a large hall which is used as a multipurpose room – sometimes as an auditorium, sometimes to celebrate certain events. Combined classes of different sections are also often organized in this hall. A close-circuit television (CCTV) had been installed at the main entrance of the school during election time, when the school was selected to be the strong room (venue used to store the electronic voting machines) of the district. The school being a government one, its space is often utilised for various government programmes, for instance, as an election center, common examination center, etc. Now the camera is used to check the movement of the students coming in and going out of the school.

2.3.1 Students' composition

The total number of students in the year 2017-2018 was 471. Out of them as per the data collected from the school attendance registers, 317 belonged to the Muslim community, 139 belonged to the Hindu community and fifteen belonged to the Christian community. Among these groups there are linguistic divisions of several forms, some distinct and some overlapping. The Muslim students in terms of language can be broadly divided into the East-Bengal origin¹ speakers, Bengali speakers and Assamese speakers. The Hindu students can be divided into Assamese, Hindi, Bengali and Adivasi² speakers. The Christian students can be divided into Adivasi speakers and Hindi speakers.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the ethnic profile of the students is crucial in many ways to reflect on the debates on nation-building and migration with special reference to the state of Assam.

It is important to note that Muslims do not constitute a homogenous category here. Majority of the Muslim students can be identified as Muslims of East Bengal origins. As per various accounts, the Muslims who came to Assam in different phases of the 19th and 20th century and settled predominantly in the char areas of lower and middle Assam are known as immigrant or East Bengal origin Muslims (Nath, 2021). Among them the groups can be divided based on their place of origin as *Dhakaiyya* Muslims, *Sylheti*

¹ The spoken dialect of this community is rather a mixture that has seen the influence of Bengali, Assamese, Arabic, Urdu and other languages (Hossain, 2018, p. 57).

² Adivasi refers to the heterogenous group of workers who were brought to Assam during the colonial period to work in tea plantations (Goswami, 2015, p. 262).

Muslims, *Mymensinghia* Muslims, *Noakhalia* Muslims, etc. These groups are primarily Bengali speakers but have different dialects and it is the distinguishing feature among them. However, these distinctions based on origin and dialects are not recognized in Assam and these groups are collectively identified as Miya Muslims (Ibid). These groups are also referred to as “Bengali Muslims” (Hussain, 1987).

Almost all the students of the school belong to the lower economic strata of the society. Their parents comprise mostly of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers. Of them 80.39% were engaged in unskilled works and 19.61% were engaged in semi-skilled works. Around seventy percent of the total population is boys and thirty percent is girls.

The school had many notable persons as its alumni. However, with time it lost its glory to some extent, as narrated by the principal of the school. As a result, in 2014, the all-boys school decided to convert to a co-educational institution in order to increase student enrollment. At present one-third of the students are girls. Teachers lamented that the number of students from the ‘Assamese’ community and other students from well-to-do families had dwindled over the years. The mushrooming of private schools, as pointed out by the teachers, was the main reason for the lower admission rate of students to the school. This has also led to the decrease in the number of ‘quality’ students coming to the school according to them. A few teachers felt that the school’s academic performance had not improved and that the school’s reputation had suffered as a result of the lack of ‘quality’ students. The school now receives an overwhelming number of enrollment applications. The influx was so high (during 2019-20 academic sessions), that for Class VI, it had to introduce a third section to incorporate the students. Still, a few teachers along with the principal informed me that they are trying their best to promote their school. They have been also trying to bring more students belonging to Assamese and Hindu communities. According to them, this is done to balance the ratio of the religious communities in the school, among the students. They also believe that coming of such students will improve the academic status of the school.

2.3.2 Teachers’ composition

The teachers’ profile contrasts with that of the students. Here majority of the teachers represent upper-caste Hindu religion. The school has a total of twenty-nine teachers of which twenty-four belong to the Hindu community and five to the Muslim community.

In terms of caste, nineteen of the teachers are from the General Category, seven from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category, two from the Scheduled Caste (SC), one from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. Seventeen of the total teachers were women. The teachers are recruited to the school as per the government recruitment process and are paid according to the government scale.

2.4. Imagination of nation through visual symbols

Visual representations in the form of posters, images, sculptures and quotes are demonstrated in various corners of the school space. These are used as a means to shape students in a specific way by visually exposing them to certain ideas. Apart from the large statue of the Ahom General Lachit Barphukan³, (recently installed), which speaks volumes about regional identity, the posters of some other people of regional and cultural importance attract the eyes, as one enters the school building. There are also posters of national figures, who had contributed towards the shaping of the Indian national identity consciousness. The images of regional and cultural importance which are on display in this school are: Bishnu Rabha⁴, Lakshminath Bezbaruah (literary stalwart known for his contribution towards constructing Assamese nationalist ideas), Jyoti Prasad Agarwala (known for giving shape and direction to the development of a distinct Assamese culture and identity) and Bhupen Hazarika (known for his diverse contribution in the cultural field. He interpreted and presented Assam's rich folk culture, diverse community identities through his songs). These figures are popular in Assam for their contribution towards strengthening of the Assamese culture and language. National figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru (first prime minister of independent India and a freedom fighter), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (second president of India and known for his support towards education of the youth. Teachers' Day in India is celebrated in his honour), Mahatma

³ Lachit Borphukan, as mentioned in military wiki, was a commander in the Ahom kingdom and is considered a regional icon. He is known for his leadership in the 1671 Battle of Saraighat where the Ahom army defeated the Mughal army. Lachit is revered for his patriotism towards his motherland as in this battle he fought despite having high fever. He even went to the extent of beheading his own uncle for the sake of his land for showing negligence towards his duties (Kanwak, 2000).

⁴ Bishnu Prashad Rabha known for his contributions in the fields of music, dance, painting, literature as well as political activism. Known also as "Kalaguru" (the master of arts) Rabha is a controversial figure as he denounced India's freedom from British rule by leading a march holding black flag as he believed freedom aspired by the Indian bourgeois class was not the real freedom that would lead to the total emancipation of the poor and oppressed. However, he is recognized as an imminent person of regional importance and every year his death anniversary is celebrated as 'Rabha Diwas' by focusing only on his selected songs and poems and deliberately ignoring his revolutionary zeal. It can defiantly be considered as a strategic move to prevent the new generation from knowing his revolutionary zeal and emancipatory creations (Hazarika, 2020).

Gandhi (leader of India's independence movement, known as the father of the nation and for his principle of 'ahimsa' (non-violence) and APJ Abdul Kalam's (known as the missile man of India and former president of India. He played a leading role in the development of India's missile and nuclear weapons programs) images are also displayed. These icons are selected as they represent the unified nation building process.



Figure 1: Statue of Lachit Barphukan



Figure 2: Pictures of national and regional figures

Through the portrayal of images, we can see that a balance is sought to be created by the school authorities, in terms of representing national and regional figures of importance. However, the absence of women in this representation cannot be ignored. There are notable women figures of regional and national importance like, Mula Gabhoru ⁵ , Kanaklata Barua (Indian freedom fighter from Assam. She was shot dead by the Indian Imperial Police of the British Raj while leading a procession bearing the National Flag during the Quit India Movement of 1942), Mamoni Roisom Goswami (celebrated writer of contemporary Assamese literature. She worked as mediator between the separatist group United Liberation Front of Asom and the Government of India and can be

⁵ She was a warrior princess who fought against the Afghan invaders as mentioned in Assam intro (2022). Though she was killed in battle, she is held as embodiment of Assam/Ahom women's courage and strength. She was one of the earliest freedom fighters of regional importance, who fought against the invaders valiantly (Pathak, 2008).

regarded as a figure striking a balance between regionalism and nationalism), etc. of regional importance, and Sarojini Naidu (known as the Nightingale of India, she was also a great orator, campaigner for equality, poet of Modern India and one of the most eminent freedom fighters of India), Savitribai Phule (was a pioneer in providing education for girls and for ostracized portions of society. She became the first female teacher in India and opened a school for girls and a shelter for destitute women), Rani Laxmi Bai (an Indian queen who became a symbol of women resistance to the British Raj for Indian nationalists for leading the rebellion of 1857). The absence of the images of women who had contributed to the nation building process, hints at the general discourse of the absence of women from the public space, in the creation of the national identity.

2.5 Everyday production of nation in school

Aside from visual representations and images, the daily production of nation occurs in the school through the practices in the daily assembly session. The assembly session is supposed to be a very disciplined and serious affair. The seriousness of this session implies the importance of the reproduction of the nation, in the everyday school culture. It is strictly followed that the entrance to the school is closed with the start of the assembly session. All the students assemble together in the field for the prayer session. Those who enter the school premises late are allowed to enter only after it ends. The teachers are supposed to come out from the common room and stand in front of the students to attend the session. The school assembly is initiated by the secretary of the student council of the school. The principal of the school stands beside him, and a few students who will be leading the different sessions of the programme stand in the front. The session starts with the students performing one or two physical exercises, like bending to their sides and touching their feet, raising their hands up above their heads and so on. Sometimes the session is accompanied by drum beats, which is carried out by the male students of the school. Soon after this, the Indian National Anthem Jana Gana Mana is sung in unison by the teachers and the students. The anthem is followed by the National Pledge (India is my country). This pledge is first taken in English and then in Assamese. It is followed by a news reading session. The headlines of the first and last page of an Assamese newspaper are read by one of the students. Following this, one notable quote by an imminent personality. The students enjoy the freedom of choosing any quotes on their own. After the reading of the quote, the prayer session ends and the

students are to return to their respective classrooms in order and without breaking their lines.

Figure 3: Morning assembly session in the government school under the supervision of teachers



Figure 4: Assembly session



The assembly session that takes place every day tries to make the students aware of their national identity. The participation of all students in performing and revering common symbols, such as singing songs and taking pledges, is an attempt towards creating a common national identity of the students. These performances are supposed to make the students feel united and build a sense of collectivity for the nation. This investment in cultivating a sense of collectivity, on an everyday basis, is an integral part of schooling. The gathering of all the school's teachers and students emphasises the importance of the assembly session. The school attempts to create a sense of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) by having students sing the national anthem and take the national pledge, commemorating the idea of a unified India and viewing its citizens as members of a family and instilling a sense of comradeship in the minds of the students. Michael Billig (1995) argued that the ideological habits that reproduce a nation are nameless and remain hidden and contribute towards "Banal Nationalism" (Billig, 1995, p.6). Schools through the daily assembly session, lead to the production of this "Banal Nationalism" which otherwise goes unnoticed. The morning assembly is therefore the collective event, as stated by Meenakshi Thapan (2013, p.163) to celebrate the common presence of teachers and students in the school space. The importance of the assembly session in paying tributes and at the same time recreating the nation is mentioned by Veronique Benei (2008) as well. She focuses on the way assembly sessions through daily repetition, rote learning and memorisation attempt to bring an idea of sacredness towards it by equating it with the procedures in a temple. These collective daily actions help to create the idea of Indians as members of a united family (Benei, 2007, p.54). In the school under study, one can argue that the assembly session serves as the base for the reproduction of the nation on a daily basis and an attempt at the creation of a common national identity.

2.5.1 Observation of student assembly

The observation of the daily production of the nation, through the assembly session signifies the kind of student identity, which the school's dominant culture seeks to create elevating it as the ideal one. This creation of a 'proper' student identity, through these disciplinary mechanisms during the assembly session can be observed practiced at the school. This is also complemented by the teachers' view, regarding the importance behind celebrating the nation through assembly session.

The presence of the teachers in front of the students creates an image of supervision and power relation during the assembly process. Discipline is maintained in terms of regulating ones' body and language. Disciplinary mechanism imposed on the physical aspect can be observed before the prayer session, when the students start to form their lines, maintaining shoulder length distance between one another. They are also supposed to keep their body erect and look forward to the person standing ahead, while singing the National Anthem. While taking the Pledge as well, they are supposed to salute with arm raised straight with clenched fist. Discipline is not only limited to the body of the students, but extends to what is over it too, i.e. the school uniform. It is in the assembly session that often the senior students, who are entrusted to look after discipline, would check the uniforms of the students and anyone found violating it were punished by the principal. The teachers as well as the seniors ensured that the students maintained their bodily posture and somber attitude. Discipline in terms of attitude and behaviour of the students extends to the sphere of pronunciation too. In the school it is mandated that proper pronunciation is made, especially in terms of the Assamese language. This emphasis of the school on pronunciation can be observed in the assembly session. For instance, a male student from Class VII read a quote by Mahatma Gandhi, "If someone strikes you in one cheek, you must offer the other as well" (*Eta gaalot thappor marile, etu gaal pati dibo lage*). After this the student was corrected by the principal and made to repeat the quote in 'proper' formal Assamese language, replacing the word *eta* by *ekhon* (one), *thappor* (slap) by *sor* (slap) and *etu* by *ikhon* (the other one).

The assembly session also gives a glimpse of the gender distinction practiced throughout the school culture. The students stand in lines (rows) based on their gender and not their Class. The boys' rows start from the left side and this is immediately followed by the girls' rows. Thus, a distinct gender division can be seen starting from the morning assembly session in the school. The assignment of the drum beating procedure only to boys indicates the construction of gender identity, with display of force being assigned to the male students.

2.5.1.1 Teachers' perspective on the school assembly

Most of the teachers justified the singing of the national anthem and taking of pledge every day by saying that it is done to foster unity and a sense of national identity

consciousness among the students. The views of a few teachers have been presented to understand their perspectives. Abhay, thirty-five years, a male teacher, who teaches political science at the higher secondary level, is very active in official as well as other extracurricular activities in the school. He believes that since students are the future citizens of the country, they must be endowed with the qualities and behaviours considered worthy and appropriate for its citizens. According to him, the process of collective singing of the songs regularly will bring a sense of unity and commonality among the students. This will ultimately in the long run, guide them in the understanding of their nation as a whole keeping aside their differences.

Shivani, thirty, a female teacher, who teaches Retail Marketing to the students from Class VIII onwards, has a similar view regarding the repetition of the singing process. She says,

The students might not be able to understand it initially. But when it is repeated over and over again... They might not understand it when they are in Class VI, VII but later on they will be bound to understand why we pray. With time they will understand that in the prayer session we keep the country in our mind.

Thus, the teachers' perspectives indicate that they are optimistic about the daily process of creating the nation at school in the assembly session. They believe that it may eventually help the students to be good citizens of the country. It always helps to keep their connection with the nation in their minds. Through the assembly session, the school tries to produce the students as one identical national community despite their differences. They are expected to maintain the solidarity and peace of the nation, without disrupting the idea of the nation as a single entity.

From the interviews conducted among the students it was found that overall the students have an idea about certain procedures happening in the assembly session. For instance, the students are aware about the important/sacred status of the national anthem, but majority of them are clueless regarding why it is being sung in schools. While they expressed no dissatisfaction to continue the regular daily assembly session, they expressed that they were not able to understand the significance and meaning. They just perform it out of habit, imitating one another. For most, the assembly session is an event that would help them to pass their day well. Thus the purpose of the school to create the idea of a single nation with like-minded national citizens through the assembly session is

not followed by all. However, the assembly session do create an idea of the presence of belonging to a nation in the minds of a few students.

2. 6. Annual events celebrated in the school

The school academic calendar is an important instrument in all the government schools. This calendar issued by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Assam dictates the events that are to be celebrated in schools and in what manner throughout the academic year.

One of the teachers told me that the majority of the images displayed on the school wall, as mentioned earlier, were purchased to commemorate notable people's death anniversaries. On such occasions, a portrait of the person would be placed on a table, and flowers and incense sticks are placed in front of the image. During the course of the fieldwork, the anniversaries of Bishnu Rabha, Mahatma Gandhi, Bhupen Hazarika and Jyoti Prasad Rabha were observed and celebrated in the school.

Apart from these, some other days like Republic Day, Independence Day, and *Saraswati Puja*⁶ were celebrated yearly, without fail, and in grand style. The first two of these celebrations honoured the nation, while the third one is a religious ceremony with regional overtones to it. The other significant events celebrated in the school are- Sankardeva Tithi ⁷ and *Fateha-Doaz-Daham* ⁸ . The school, which has a majority of Muslim students, tries to portray itself as a secular institution by celebrating the festivals of multiple religious communities. These events are not celebrated annually but at intervals. Lack of fund is often cited as the reason for the inability of the school to celebrate these days on a regular basis.

For the purpose of the study, accounts of the celebration of Independence Day and *Saraswati Puja* are being presented here. Through Independence Day the nation is celebrated annually and it is considered that it brings the feeling of patriotism and common national identity consciousness among the students. Along with that *Saraswati*

⁶ *Saraswati Puja* is celebrated to venerate the Hindu Goddess of learning, *Goddess Saraswati*

⁷ Sankardeva tithi is celebrated to commemorate the death anniversary of the Vaishnavite saint of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva.

⁸ Fateha-Doaz-Daham is celebrated to commemorate the death of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani who was the founder of the Qadiriah Sufi order. This ceremony has been celebrated in many schools in Assam for ages and still, in some Muslim-dominated areas it is celebrated more as a cultural celebration, than a religious affair (Ahmed, 2021, well-known Muslim figure of Nagaon).

Puja is celebrated even when the majority of the student population is Muslim. The observation of the celebration of these days helps to understand how national identity and regional community identity are promoted and practiced in the school. The high level of student participation and the regularity with which these festivals were chosen over others influenced their selection.

2.7 Celebration of the nation

The importance of the celebration of the nation in the school can be assessed when it is seen celebrated everyday through the morning assembly. This importance of national identity construction is emphasized and celebrated in a grander manner during the Independence Day, celebrated on 15th August. This day is celebrated to honour the day India got independence from the British rule in the year 1947. The preparation for Independence Day takes place in a much elaborate way in the school as it takes place in the middle of the school academic calendar. During this time, classes are held regularly and attendance is high. In the academic calendar it has been mentioned that, students are to take part in the district level Independence Day programme. The students start practicing for the march past/parade from a month before, under the guidance of their teachers. It must be mentioned here that the students who are allowed to participate in the parade are all boys. A young male teacher entrusted to look into this event explained the reason behind the absence of girls when asked. He said that initially, a few years back they had girls in their parade. But, it seemed that girls were too weak or lazy to do the march properly. He added that they were not able to co-ordinate well with the boys too. Another reason given was that because the students practicing for the parade had to stay late after school, most of the girls' parents refused to let them participate. Thus, we can see that boys were given a more active role when it came to celebrating the nation.

On the day of the event, at exactly 7.30 am, the flag was hoisted by the principal with a student, who was a member of Scouts and Guide. The students gathered around the Indian National Flag that was hoisted in the specific space kept for it. After the flag was hoisted, the students along with the teachers present there sang the national anthem in a saluting position. The principal then gave a speech on the importance of Independence Day, stating how the freedom fighters sacrificed their lives for the country. This speech is followed by one-minute silence remembering the martyrs of the country. After this session, sweets are distributed to the people present in the school. The students then

disperse and prepare to go to the district field, where the main event takes place collectively for the whole district. Boys and girls of the school can be seen forming queues, to go to the stadium where the event is held.

Figure 5: Celebration of Independence Day in the government school



Thus, we can see the celebration of the nation at the school, on an annual and daily basis. This particular event has the potential to evoke very strong feelings of patriotism among students.

2.8 Gender regime

In this school, we can see that the school through various mechanisms try to establish the gender regime among its population; which includes the teachers and the students.

Gender regime is “defined as the pattern of practise 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).

2.8.1 Everyday segregation

A segregation based on heterosexuality exists throughout the school space. This segregation based on gender, applies to both students and teachers. For the students, this

segregation was forced by the school, and in the case of the teachers it was self-imposed. For instance, in the teachers' common room there was segregation in terms of gender in the sitting arrangement. Male and female teachers maintained a strict boundary when it came to proximity. The non-teaching responsibilities of the teachers were also influenced by the same logic. The male teachers during any event would be the ones doing the technical works, while responsibilities like serving tea would be entrusted exclusively to women. It was also witnessed that only senior female teachers in terms of age were involved in the decision making process in the school. For the male teachers this segregation based on age and seniority did not exist. For them, their active performance in the school mattered. Self-imposition of gendered segregation in terms of discipline for the teachers, specially the female teachers existed in terms of their choice of dress as well, which will be discussed in the later chapters.

This gendered segregation existed for the students, but it was a forced and monitored one. In the classroom, students are not allowed to sit with their classmates of the opposite gender. There were also limitations based on gendered friendships. Strict surveillance was implemented to ensure that boys and girls had limited close interaction within the school. This surveillance was applied to the students in their classrooms and also when they would move out of the classroom during recess.

2.8.1.1 Everyday segregation

In the celebration of Independence Day discussed earlier, it was seen that for the parade, only boys were trained. The restriction on the female students from participating in the parade by the teachers, contributes towards creating a certain form of subordinate identity for the female students by constructing them as physically weak. A few female students expressed their dissatisfaction on not being able to participate in the Independence Day celebration actively. The female students often judged by their community background, as we will see in the later chapters, are considered to be weak physically as compared to their male counterparts in the school. In addition to that, they are also stereotyped as hard to control/tame. The traditional role of men as the protector of the nation, while women sitting at home cooking food and doing other household works, can be applied to this typecasting aspect of the school. The fact that girls are supposed to be under protection is a narrative that is common in the school. A statement

by a female student of the school, Roshni, fourteen years, is often the accepted idea among the student community of both genders.

Mota nohole khuabo kune, maiki nohole randhi bahi khuabo kune. (If there is no men, who will feed you, and if there is no women, who will cook and serve)

The women are prohibited from actively participating in the celebration of the mentioned event, through which the idea of the production of nation is generated. This plays a role in constructing certain gendered identities, with respect to the nation, in the mind of the students. In addition to that, the role of serving food assigned specifically to female teachers, which is self-imposed by themselves in the school, serve to create a similar image of a women's identity to the students. Women are assigned the responsibility of the kitchen even when they are in a professional space; thus helping to stabilize existing patriarchal gender relations. Kraus (1993) has argued that at the core of women's repression lies the symbolic manifestation of women's subordination. To this, gender division of labour plays a key role as a tool for women's subordination. This symbolic violence on women is evident within or outside the family relation for women (Bhattacharyya, 2019).

2.9 Celebration of Saraswati Puja

In Assam *Saraswati Puja* is one of the most awaited and most popular festivals. It is celebrated on the fifth day of the month of *Magh* (January-February) by the Hindu Lunar calendar. Its celebration dates back to the early 20th century. Through historical records it is known that the first evidence of *Saraswati Puja* celebration in Assam was in Guwahati. It was celebrated only after the establishment of schools and colleges. It was celebrated then in schools and colleges and in a few public spaces. There are records that from around 1905 onwards, the *puja* was celebrated in Assam. It was like a public festival and everyone enjoyed participating in it (Raichoudhury, 2017). This celebration of the festival continues even now and its popularity and venues has increased manifold over the years. There have also been many changes over the years in its way of celebration, as well as the way of people's participation. Thus, the observation of this Hindu festival in a Muslim majority school becomes important for the thesis. The way students from diverse religious communities perceive the day, and the level and nature of participation by the students, becomes crucial in the understanding of the dynamics inside the school.

2.9.1 The celebration

The *mandap* (temporary tent) for the celebration of the *puja* (religious festival) is constructed right at the middle of the school field. This was to be the location for the idol of the deity to be worshipped. For the celebration of the festival, two hundred rupees each was collected from teachers and twenty rupees from the students. However, most of the students failed to pay the money. Teachers cited inadequate funds as the reason for such a collection drive.

On this day, a large number of students turn up at school. Students from other schools come to visit as well. The ceremony started once the Brahmin priest came. The priest while performing the rituals of the *puja* put on a saffron piece of cloth to cover his upper body and also wore a white dhoti. On one side of the field, the priest was getting things ready for the rituals and on the other side (then) popular contemporary Assamese songs (*Masoloi Goisilung*- went to catch fish) were played in the speakers.

Figure 6: Performance of religious rituals during *Saraswati puja*



A student named Abhisekh Gayan, of Class X, was asked to perform the Boron (offerings to the deity), representing the school. Usually the General Secretary of the students' union performs the ritual, but since the secretary was Muslim that year, the organisers of the event had to arrange another boy who was active and good in studies to

perform the ritual. I was informed by one Hindu male teacher, that the Muslim boys do not like taking part in the ritual process. So, they are not given the task. The student (Abhisekh) was unaware of the significance behind the rituals he was performing and admitted that he was just performing whatever the priest was asking him to do without giving it a thought. The responsibility of performing this ritual in the school is always entrusted to the boys and has not been given to any girl. The reason stated was that girls in the school were not that active and hence would not like to come forward or participate in any such activities. Menstruation was also cited as a reason.

The organisers of the festival in the year 2018 were four male teachers, along with members (i.e., students) from the student union. The members of the student union consisted of students from the Muslim community as well as Hindu. They were actively involved in the organization of the festival. The day before the festival, a few male students accompanied the concerned teachers in preparing for the event, in activities like marketing and decorations.

Though the school authorities maintained a clear demarcation, in terms of gender, regarding who would be participating actively in the religious ritual process, they did not maintain any barrier in terms of religion. All the students regardless of their religious affiliation could participate in the religious rituals. These activities included offerings made to the deity in the form of flowers, fruits; receiving religious offerings like *nirmali*⁹ and *charnaamrit*¹⁰ in return. The teachers stated that they do not force any Muslim students to take part in rituals. The task to offer boron is reserved only for the male, Hindu students.

After the rituals of the *puja* were over, a male person appointed by the priest, applies a *phoot/bindi* (a mark on the forehead with vermilion kept near the idol during the *puja*) to the students as well as the people around. Many boys informed that since they were Muslims, they will not be able to accept it. However, in the confusion and chaos two Muslim girls also received the *phoot*. The girls were in shock and had mixed emotions on their faces as they could not decline the offering of *phoot* on time. They had tears in

⁹ It is the flowers and certain *Puja* specific items like *Silikha* (a fruit), leaves like Bel leaves, holy basil leaves etc. offered to the deity (in this context Goddess Saraswati), which is then shared with the devotees attending the *puja*, by the priest performing the *Saraswati Puja*.

¹⁰ *Charnamrit-Charnamrit*, or *Panchamrit*, is a sweet drink made up of five things- curd, honey, milk, holy basil and ghee distributed in the form of *prasad* in *Saraswati Puja*.

their eyes after some time and defended themselves by telling their friends who were nearby, that it happened so suddenly that they were unable to stop the man. Saying this they went to wash the *phoot* away with water.

One girl (Nafisa, thirteen, *Mymensingia* community) said that they, being Muslims would be scolded for wearing something that belongs to Hindus (Muslim hoi Hindu manuhor *phoot* loi). However, they were sure that none of their school friends would report about it back home.

Armina, fourteen, belonging to the *Dhakaiyya* community said that having stayed with Hindu people near her house; she too has developed the habit to take flowers offered to the deity back home. She would keep it inside her books so that the belief behind keeping flowers received from *Saraswati Puja* works. She mentioned that she knew according to Allah she is not supposed to accept such offerings, but since she is a student it won't matter much. Thus, we can see that certain girls have accepted the Hindu normalcy through their negotiations of their Hindu normative social context (Hussain, 2019).

Figure 7: Students dancing to popular music on the event of *Saraswati puja*



The supervising of cooking of the *bhog* (offering), i.e., *khisiri* (a meal prepared by mixing rice with *dal*, various vegetables and spices) was done by the official cook of the school, the one who prepares the mid-day meals. The preparation for the *khisiri* and the *proxad* (mixture of *moong* beans and fruits) was done by him and a male helper. The

school had also hired some male cooks for the same purpose. All the people thus involved in cooking were Hindus and male. The *proxad* later on was distributed by one of the female teachers amidst the students as well as the teachers. The *khisiri* was distributed by the boys of the higher secondary levels in a classroom designated for the purpose.

After the commencement of the rituals as well as distribution of the *proxad* and *bhog*, towards the end of the field, a large crowd of students gathered. The crowd was centered on two boys who were dancing to bollywood songs in hip-hop style. There were others waiting in queue for their performance. It was not a dance competition organized by the school, but since music was already being played in the field/background, the students who loved dancing started performing their dances. After a few performances, the secretary of the student union was sent by the teachers to stop the dance performances. He scolded the students and questioned them if they are supposed to dance on this day. However as reported by the students, it is a common phenomenon in their school to dance on *Saraswati Puja*.

2.9.1.1 Different modes of participation

As observed from the above description of the festival, we can see that there is a huge gathering of students in the school on this day. However, the participation of students varied on the basis of gender. It was observed that rituals which had a religious and purity concept attached to it were reserved only for the boys, especially Hindu boys. Distinction in terms of gender was also witnessed in terms of cooking and serving food. Whereas in other school events, the female teachers were expected to engage in serving food as they are supposed to play this role of cooking and serving food in their household. On this day, since it had a religious aspect attached to it, women were restricted from performing these works, which are generally considered feminine activities.

While the male students got to play an active role in the ritual process, the female students played a passive role, similar to the celebration of Independence Day.

In terms of religiosity, the Muslim students, especially boys helped in marketing, organization activities of the celebration. But, when the activity involved a religious perspective, they did not engage themselves in it.

This day is a very popular one and is eagerly anticipated by all the students regardless of their religious and social identity. The reason behind the popularity of the festival among the students is the freedom that they get and for girls especially, the ability to wear traditional clothes and engage in fashion.

The view of Pankaj, a male teacher of the school can be cited which throws light on the importance given to fashion in the name of this festival.

The *puja* now-a-days has become nothing but a *xundori protiyogita* (beauty contest), because of which the students feel the pressure to dress well and look good. But not all parents can afford to provide their children with the desired accessories, which might disappoint their children and this may affect their relationships with their parents.

It can be said that the celebration of the festival, partially cuts across the divide that exists in terms of religion. Students from all religious communities take part in it, while maintaining their internal boundaries. The nationalist ideal of a secular India which has space for all religions within it is the idea that gets reflected in the celebration of the festival, when one looks at the participation of different groups of people from outside. At the same time, it also shows how the participation is differentiated based on gender and religion.

In India, the secularisation debate has been more or less confined to the problems in the construction of a modern secular state. It has concerned itself to aspects related to the separation of state from religion, understood broadly in terms of erasing state practices from religious domination or significance. It engages in the relationship of the state to minority religious communities and the separation of politics from religion (Kalpagam, 2006).

The normalization of the celebration of the *Saraswati Puja* in schools is quite unique in its nature, as it seldom evokes any public outcry and has become a part of culture in Assam. The age long celebration of it has made it natural and homogenized, without invoking protests unlike in other parts of India. However, in case of Assam, as mentioned, all the government funded vernacular schools celebrate the festival and entail participation of diverse communities, including Muslims, in the celebration of it. Yet amidst these festivities, the students of the school under study negotiate their identities.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, the relation between the population's identity composition based on gender, class and community (linguistic, ethnic and religious) and the events celebrated in the school under study has been analysed. The production of collective identity within the school is done as per the dominant culture of the society, and the divisions and social inequalities are expressed in the process. This chapter presents production and reproduction of a community of students in the school in accordance to ceremonies and symbols which are often reflective of the dominant culture.

The school through the observation and celebration of certain symbols promotes a kind of regional and national narrative in the minds of the students. The celebration of the nation in a banal everyday manner in the school tries to leave an impression of national identity in the students. The celebration of different cultural and religious ceremonies, might lead students to identify themselves on the basis of their differences with one another. Still, the daily assembly works to bring the students together into a collective national community, to give them a sense of belonging to one nation, amidst the differences.

In the construction of a common national identity, another form of identity that was constantly being shaped in the school is the gender identity. From the literature discussed in the previous chapter, it was identified how the gendered construction of a nation is important, but often goes unnoticed. The invisibility of women for the construction of the nation gets highlighted from the present study. The absence of women's images/sculptures in the school to be portrayed as role model when imagining the nation by the dominant school culture is a theme that spreads through multiple events in the school. The school reproduces the idea of complete absence of women and their presence only in the domain of the private sphere in the construction of a nation. From the absence of important women figures to be commemorated or acknowledged, to the absence of women in the celebration of the nation (Independence Day) and their absence in religious activities, the school tends to reproduce the existing gender inequalities of the dominant culture.

Overall, though the school tries to be a secular space for the students, acknowledging from time to time, the presence of a huge majority of Muslim students, the importance and normalization given to Hindu culture over others cannot be ignored. The celebration

of *Saraswati Puja* in such a grand manner, even on a Sunday and the academic calendar backing this celebration shows the normalization of the matter.

The other important aspect is the importance given to Assamese language and culture. It is a fact that the school being an Assamese medium school, the authorities would try to impose the language and make the students speak in it. This assertion of Assamese as the official/preferred language gives Assamese culture a special status too among other regional cultures. A standard language identity was emphasized by the school and proper usage of it is considered ideal for the construction of one's national identity.