

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **GENDER, DISCIPLINE AND SCHOOLED BODY**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Discipline in general means the way in which order is maintained through rules and regulations within various institutions of the society. Since the time the term was defined and applied by Weber in his essay, “The Meaning of Discipline” (Gerth & Mills, 1948), it came to be incorporated and used in various settings of social control like political, military and religious organisations, public administration and later in modern education system.

Hooda (1965) summarizes the meaning of discipline as the way the conduct of human beings is socially conditioned to follow a certain pattern. The social conditioning of individual takes place in diverse forms in different spaces as they grow up. Educational institutions, especially schools play a very important role in this aspect since school is a space where an individual spends much of his initial phase of life. It is here that an individual as a child makes his first entry into the wider society and gets socialized with the disciplines deemed correct for the functioning of the society. The school as an institution makes the individual a disciplined social being by stating the do’s and don’ts of ordered social life under the supervision of teachers as the supreme authority. It is here in school that the individual learns to respect or resist the virtues that are considered vital for a given society (Hooda, 1964).

This idea of discipline is often enforced and expected to be performed differently based on gender. Educational institutions are not an exception in this regard. Considering this, the present chapter looks at gender relations in school from an institutional perspective. Different arrangements are made at school to maintain discipline of the school which shapes gender identities in significant ways. This institutionalization of gender in school can be considered as the gender regime of the school (Connell, 1996). Benei (2008) talks in a similar manner about the plural nature of the idea of masculinity and femininity in the context of schools in Maharashtra and the way different forms of gendered actions and performances are expected from students and women teachers based on their gender identities. Saba Hussain (2019) looks at the ways discipline is enforced upon and expected to be performed by schoolgirls based on their ethnicity and class in schools of Assam.

To attain the varied idea of discipline based on ones' gender, class, ethnic and other identities, the body of the individual becomes one of the prime focus. It is the body where the ideals of discipline are inscribed primarily and are supposed to be displayed. Thus in school, the body of the individual, plays a fundamental role in establishing the regime of discipline. Importance given to controlling and limiting the bodies of the students is central while maintaining order. This is done through various ways throughout the process of schooling that ranges from limiting the mobility of students, restrictions in intermixing of genders, to prescribing specific dress codes. Connel (2015) considers that "bodies as agents in social practice are involved in the very construction of the social world, the bringing-into-being of social reality" (Connell, 2015, p.72, as cited in Paechter, 2006). The body in the school is looked at as a cultural body, as a site of culture. Cultural meanings and values are thought to reside in and on the material body. Thus, the body not only reflects these constructions but also has the capacity to challenge them, reconceptualising that position. (Reischer & Koo, 2004). The cultural meanings attached to bodies are often based on the dominant culture of the society, one that is representative of the nation. Schools attempt to reproduce an ideal disciplined feminine and masculine cultured body which would suit the process of nation-building. In this process, the forms of discipline that are preached are of those that suit the interest of the dominant sections of society, upholding certain cultural traits as superior over others.

Based on this background of disciplinary measures in school, the chapter analyses the way discipline is enforced primarily on the students through different gender codes. The school under study does this through surveillance on dress, behaviour and friendship networks among the students based on their gender. The disciplinary mechanism does not remain limited only to the students, but is enforced upon the teachers, particularly the female teachers of the school. This chapter makes an attempt to understand the disciplinary mechanism of the school that is expected to be maintained by its students and teachers. It also seeks to explore the pattern of resistance and conformity on the part of the actors in response to these disciplinary codes.

#### **4.2 School specific gender codes**

The school under study, through their infrastructure, control of movements, uniform dress codes, and proper forms of conduct, behaviour, outlines its gendered disciplinary patterns.

#### ***4.2.1 Discipline regarding dress***

When it comes to dress code, in the sphere of school life it does not remain concentrated only on the piece of clothing as such, but extends much beyond it to the overall appearance of the person. This includes hair style, fashion sense, cleanliness and hygiene of the person. In school, it is noticed that these criteria are sought to be met as per the order of discipline imposed. In the school under study, when it comes to discipline regarding dress code, it must be remembered that by dress code all these factors are considered.

The simple piece of attire that an individual wears is often infused with wide meanings. Dress not only signifies the evolution of humans as ‘cultured’ beings, but also serves as a signifier of an individual’s self-expression; it reflects the diversities within culture and symbolizes national identity. The history of dress can be attributed to its role as an important medium of exercising control over the human body and sexuality, particularly that of women. The definition of a ‘good’ woman or a ‘bad’ woman objectively is guided by the type of dress which leads to society’s perception of one’s character. Thus dress, especially ‘dressing the feminine body’ has been a crucial aspect of cultural politics (Lahiri & Bandhyopadhyay, 2012, p.20). In educational institutions too, often there is prescribed dress code for students as well as teachers.

Uniform in school acts as a major instrument to establish discipline among students in terms of regulating the body. This form of uniform is based often on gender lines and is explicit in nature. There have been various researches which show how schools control and discipline student’s bodily actions and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990, p.67). It can also be observed how forms of cultural capital, class, race, and gender identity influence and affect dress style of students and their actions. This chapter is concerned with the way in which the influence and intersection of cultural capital, class and gender guide the notion of the ‘ideal’ form of discipline to be practiced in the school by its actors.

Edward W. Morris (2005) in his work looks at how educators identified students based on their manners, dress and attempted to modify any possible deficiencies by regulating their bodies. In his work he reveals how based on the perceptions of race, class and gender, the educators assumed which students lacked cultural capital and which students required disciplinary reform. Here in the school under study, the ‘dispositions associated

with gender' often lead to a gendered form of capital but expounded by the field of occupation (Skeggs, 2004).

Similarly, the way an individual adorns and modifies their self, is not a simple phenomenon, but is guided by cultural ideas over the years. To attain a certain form of look, of beauty, modifications are made on the human body which is more than just based on aesthetic principles or taste. These bodily modifications often act as a means of expressing social values and beliefs (Reisher & Koo, 2004). In case of the participants in the present study, apart from the cloth they wear to school and outside, the way they adorn themselves through modification and enhancement of their appearance by what they wear and what they apply, plays a significant role in the process of disciplining at school.

In the school under study, discipline in terms of appearance prevails not only for the student community, but for the teachers as well. To give an idea of the pattern of dress and appearance of the students and teachers, a detailed account of their uniforms is presented below. By considering the variables of class, gender and ethnicity, this chapter tries to understand the idea of discipline imposed on its population and its expected performances based on their subject positions.

#### ***4.2.1.1 Uniform of the students***

The school uniform for male students is light blue coloured checked shirt (full/half sleeves) and navy blue coloured long pants. They have a school badge which they pin over their shirt pocket. They are supposed to keep their hair short and not sport any striking hair cut or style. The uniform for female students is light blue coloured checked *kurta* with navy blue coloured trousers and navy blue *Dupatta* (scarf) that is pleated and placed across shoulders. The students would sedately wear the *Dupatta* wide, with safety pins holding it in place. They would pin their school badge in their *Dupattas*. All female students wear their hair tightly braided; a few would leave a strand or two open for style. The pattern of uniform is same for the students from Class VI to XII; although the colour is different for the Higher Secondary sections. Generally, the female students come to school without any make up (lipstick, kohl, eye liner, blush, nail paint), but if there is any kind of event in the school, most of the female students would apply lipstick and kohl. Some female students apply nail paint and keep long nails, even when they are aware that the school authorities do not allow them to do so.

All the students regardless of gender were supposed to wear black shoes with white socks. About the shoes it can be said that majority of the students do not try to keep it finely polished or even polished at all. The uniforms of the students were mostly well-maintained and appeared clean. The uniforms were provided by the school as part of a government scheme. It must be mentioned here that during the school assembly and even in classrooms, the students are told almost every day about maintaining cleanliness in terms of their uniforms, hair styles and shoes. Sometimes the principal would call a barber to the school and make him cut the hair of male students who sport different hairstyles or highlight their hair at his own expense.

#### ***4.2.1.2 Maintaining discipline through dress***

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the assembly session is one of the sites where students have to display the highest form of discipline. From forming straight lines, to maintaining equal distance among themselves; the students are expected to control their bodily movements. In the assembly session the senior students are often entrusted to look after the discipline of the younger students. They would check the uniforms of the students and anyone found violating it was called out and made to stand in front of the assembly. The teachers as well as the seniors also looked to it that the students behaved well, as they should, during the prayer session. Sometimes the ones who disobeyed or are found to be at fault were called forward and were punished by the principal. It is often in the school assembly that the offences committed by the students on the previous day would be called out by the principal and punished accordingly.

#### **4.3 Students' acts of dressing-up**

Even when the school supervises the dress code of their students within the school, the teachers do not have any say regarding the dress or behaviour of their students outside the school campus, nor do they tell the students anything about how to dress outside the school. The school believes that as long as the students are in their school uniforms, they must abstain from indulging in deviant behaviour as a sign of respect to their school. Thus, the students generally follow the dress code within school as prescribed and expected by the school authorities. However, some modify the rules without making it too obvious. The school uniforms are sometimes provided by the government and not everyone likes to wear those. Two students, Shahid and Ashinur for instance, informed me that since they go to gym sometimes and have a good body, therefore they do not like

the uniforms provided by school as it does not fit aesthetically to their body. They either alter it so that it fits their body or sew a shirt/pant on their own. The girls though do not change their uniforms. However, apart from a few girls, most of them can be seen wearing colourful and dazzling ear studs and bracelets in their hands. Often they apply *mehendi* (temporary design made with *henna*) in their hands. One student Minhaz informed me that their teachers sometimes tease them and ask if they have functions at home every week in a year.

#### **4.4 School ‘appropriate’ friendships**

In the school concerned, the relationship between the genders is looked at as one based on opposites. One should be kept away from the other to avoid intermixing.

Gendered disciplinary mechanism exists throughout the school. It is seen most active when trying to maintain disciplined bodily actions. Resisting heterosexual friendships then becomes an important issue. The disciplinary mechanism permeates into classroom spaces, the school common ground as well as peer relationships. The classroom is the central space in school where students are under direct and strict surveillance of the authorities with very little scope to behave on their own. School authorities use their heteronormative lens and apply it in the classroom in the school space. It is done to shape the students into gender conforming disciplined subjects. Thus, the collective habitus of the students and the teachers helps in enforcing heteronormativity within school (Gansen, 2017). This heteronormative practice in the classroom and school space takes place through various mechanisms during the school day. These mechanisms include maintaining segregation in classroom activities and sitting arrangements, discouraging students from forming romantic relationships, restricting and controlling movements of students within and outside the school space. To ensure that heterosexual friendships remain under control, the school employs diverse disciplinary measures in the form of punishments and surveillance. This prior consideration of heteronormative relations and surveillance to restrict extreme heterosexual friendships elicits diverse reactions from those who are at the authoritative end, i.e. the school teachers; and from those who are at the receiving end of maintaining the decorum, i.e. the students. This practice of gender segregation is mainly seen in the space of the classroom where it is supervised under direct observation of the respective authorities, teachers, and in the school campus through random patrolling by the teachers.

#### ***4.4.1 Enforcing segregation***

The segregation of gender in sitting arrangement is evident in the teachers' common room, with the male teachers occupying one corner of the room, while the women sit separately in another part of the room. The teachers usually sit in their fixed space which they choose themselves on the basis of their bonding with the person sitting next to them. A teacher may approach a teacher of the opposite gender only when something was to be discussed. The teachers believe that it is best to maintain the distance as it looks decent considering the place, i.e. school as a formal space. It was noticed that the teachers try their best to maintain physical distance with teachers from the opposite gender. Intermixing to some level on a friendly manner in terms of physical proximity can only be witnessed when the female teacher is relatively senior in age to the male teacher.

This segregation based on gender is applicable for the students as well. In every classroom of the school, there were two rows of desks and benches for the students to sit. There is a clear segregation in terms of sitting arrangement based on gender. The boys are made to sit in one row and the girls in another. It is strictly monitored that the students do not disrupt the gender order in the classroom. Even when there is no teacher in the class or during leisure, it is expected that the students would maintain the gendered sitting arrangement inside the classrooms.

#### ***4.4.2 Restrictions inside and outside classrooms***

Every classroom has two monitors (one female and one male student) who are changed every week. The monitors are selected based on their roll numbers so that every student gets a chance. However, since most of them do not want to take up the position, the same people get to do the job always. The monitors are supposed to write the names of the students who talk in class in the absence of a teacher or those who go out of the classroom often in the pretext of drinking water or to the toilet. In the end of the class hours they would hand over these names to a teacher who would come and punish the students whose names have been written.

There are teachers who are entrusted with the task of maintaining order and discipline. They move around in the school campus to see if there are any chaos and indiscipline. They mainly check that students do not indulge in consumption of intoxicating substances like *gutkha* (tobacco), cigarette, etc. and do not loiter much in the campus

creating chaos (like climbing on trees or walls of the school campus). But they also ensure that gender segregation is maintained even during the recess.

Apart from the separation of the students in terms of sitting arrangement inside the classrooms, the school authorities also see to it those male students and female student of the higher classes, i.e. from Class VIII onwards do not intermix or interact much outside the classroom space too. This interaction of opposite gendered students outside the classroom space is prohibited as it is considered that this might lead to the development of romantic relationship apart from friendship among them.

**Figure 8:** Gender segregation in classroom in the government school



Even amidst such surveillance, there are instances where students are found flouting the disciplinary norms by developing romantic relationships within the school, moving out of the campus and many other acts which are banned in school. Some of the senior teachers feel that the conversion of the school to co-education has led to many new problems. The entry of girl students into the school has made the task of maintaining discipline more challenging for them.

#### ***4.4.3 Students' relationship with the opposite sex***

In spite of the schools' investment in restricting and controlling the intermixing of genders, it is not followed in practice by students. The female students who are friends



with male students and vice-versa or those who have romantic relationships continue seeing each other in the absence of authority.

However, there is a fear in the minds of the students. There are a few students, mainly male students, who are shy and scared to go near female students. This does not mean that they do not tease their female friends or make fun of their classmates. It is just that they want to maintain physical distance. Apart from friendship groups, there are a few romantic couples within the class itself, and a few of the female students are in relationships with male students of the higher secondary levels.

Students who believe in and follow the dictates of the school disciplinary mechanism are less in this case. There are only a few like Arifa and Bikram, who have a reputation among their teachers and enjoy higher status both in terms of their social and learner identity (Reay, 2010). These students consider it appropriate to interact with students of the opposite sex only when they are decent and good in studies.

Tabassum (a girl of *Dhakaiyya* community) informed me that she stays away from boys in the presence of school authorities, as she fears being punished. She says,

The teachers tell the male students to stay away from girls and they tell the girls to stay away from boys... if they stay close together often, romantic relationships may build up and because of that argument and fights increase in the school. They do not stop us from talking with one another but tells us not to stay together much. Otherwise, they say that principal sir will scold you, suspend you from the school or call your guardian.

Jahan, fourteen years old, from *Mymensingia* community, maintains friendships with girl students of his class. However, he is aware of the rules in the school and believes it to be sensible in some sense. He was of the view that excess mingling is not good.

In school we are allowed to talk with everyone regardless of sex, but there are some who maintain inappropriate proximity, (they) talk while holding hands intimately. Such activities are to be avoided. When boys and boys stay and girls and girls stay, then they (school authorities) do not say anything but when boys and girls stay together, they comment. When they see us sitting together they ask why are we sitting with girls, what work do we have with them?

I have some good friends who are girls but if we sit together without maintaining physical distance... one boy in between two girls, I myself feel that it does not look good...

From the above excerpts, it can be observed how the school enforces and presents heteronormative relations as the ideal one and acts upon it through their disciplinary measures to ensure that no such relations can take place within the school campus under their supervision. Heterosexual relationships are considered and projected as the norm to form romantic relationships by the school authorities. It is also projected as something that should be avoided as it might lead to chaos and conflicts among the students. Romantic relationships i.e., love, thus is projected in a negative light to the students. It can be seen that the school takes a very narrow approach when it comes to forming friendship groups based on intermingling of genders, as sexual/gender transgression is believed to give way to romantic relationships above all. This idea of the school is followed by certain sections of students who believe that friendships with the opposite sex lead to unnecessary problems and thus should be curbed. It also include students who are scared enough of the school authorities to openly stay with their opposite gender friends, in the presence of their teachers, but find ways to disrupt this idea as soon as they get any scope.

#### **4.5 Students' defiance of the gender code**

The gender structure defines certain behaviours as 'masculine', and certain others as 'feminine' which then goes on to characterize and identify an individual as feminine or masculine (Connel, 1996). In the school, there are differences among the students in terms of gender but there are complexities in its practice when it comes to practice of ideal/standard/normalised gendered dispositions. Therefore, at times it is not possible to demarcate differences and establish binary based on gendered disciplinary mechanism as the school authorities try to maintain. There are many factors that goes on in the school amidst the students' relations that point out to the complexities of this idea of gendered discipline. Different shades of masculinity that Connel (1996) presented and ambivalent femininities like Skeggs (2002) argued played their parts in the creation of a space ruled by the intricacies of the students' own understanding of discipline and gender.

This gendered discipline that the school promotes impacts the lives of students in various aspects and is sought to be maintained in dress, limiting heterosexual friendships and

also in restricting and guiding behaviours of students, based on gender. These gendered disciplines in terms of behaviour are looked at mainly in the context of engaging in violence, drinking alcohol and/or taking addictive substance in the study.

In the school it was observed that compared to girls; boys tend to use physical force among themselves more. The frequency of boys engaging in physical fights is more than that of girls. However, it cannot be said that girls do not get involved in serious physical fights among themselves. For most of the girls, disagreements or tensions are often addressed through verbal altercations or by quitting a friendship group temporarily.

In terms of student friendships, the school as we have seen in the preceding section tries to restrict students on the basis of their gendered identity. Most of the students find ways to break the disciplinary norm of friendships. They mix up as soon as the teachers turn their back. In case of romantic relationships, or for those who likes to stay with the opposite gender, the classroom during leisure period or the space behind the school after school hours serve as the location within the school where they would hang out dodging the gaze of the authorities.

This form of resistance is noticed mainly practiced overtly by the female students when they stay with their guy friends in groups. There are also couples who stay together, but here again the concern and rebel nature are seen expressed by the female students mostly. This is because for boys to stay in a romantic relationship is not looked down upon by their friends unlike girls, considering they give time to their guy friends as well. The teachers also blame the female students and embarrass them more in such cases. This is because as we have discussed earlier, the responsibility to control their sexuality and protect themselves from boys is placed upon girls and they are considered better only when they behave according to the standard gendered discipline in terms of friendships.

Among the female students, there are a few from the (non-conforming group) who choose to stay with boys more than girls. Armina, fourteen years, a *Dhakaiyya* speaker, belonging to the group mentioned, who has more male friends than female and mostly stay with students from the opposite gender, says,

That is the biggest problem that I face! When I stay with boys, they (the teachers) think there is something else... not all the teachers, but Bapon sir. He thinks and then tells Vijitesh sir, who then goes on to tell all other ma'am and sir. Everyone

thinks about me the same way after that. I stay with boys since I was young because when something is told to girls and then we have a fight, they spread what was told to them before. But if you tell something to boys, even when they fight and engage in physical fights too, yet they would not leak it. That's why I like boys and not girls. But since our teachers don't like me staying with boys, I have to stay with girls for most of the times. Even then, my friends (the boys) stay near me as I have been staying with them since class VI. But see *baa* (sister), I am a girl and if I stay with four, five boys, will I have romantic relationships with all of them? That four, five will be friend obviously, but everyone thinks something else.

Because of all these reasons, as I used to get scolded all the time from the teachers, when I failed during class VII, I tried very hard to get the transfer certificate from school. I thought of leaving this school and joining somewhere else but principal sir and a few ma'am did not allow me to go. They said that I am very good and I will pass this coming session and even if I fail, they will make me pass the exams and so they requested me to stay. My Abba was saying that he will take me out and let me join in an all-girls' school, as in this school I have to hear scolding every day for staying with boys (her father gets complain against her from the teachers often regarding this).

Thus, we see that students use their agency to find out ways to be with their friends of the opposite gender whenever possible. Their informal peer groups form an important part of the school setting. This group consists of a gender order of its own which is marked but not fixed. Confusion arises among them as they try to fit themselves with a definite sexuality and identity (Connel, 1996). The ones who are submissive try to do it in secret, while the daring ones not care much about hanging out openly. This fixation of students based on gender norms turns out to be a problem for a few students. For instance, Armina, is not accepted by other girls of her class too, as she is seen as someone 'bad' who hangs out only with boys. She faces rebuke from teachers as well for staying with opposite gender. She, on the other hand faces the dilemma of being forced to stay with her girl classmates and her desire to stay with her guy friends.

This issue of staying with or not staying with boys often leads to arguments in the class among the girls under study. The submissive ones would see the outgoing girls as

‘rowdy’ and ‘tough’ who does not care at all, uses bad words and hangout with boys. While Armina and her friends would consider them as too ‘girly’ (*besi suwalir nisina kore; nakhra koribo, enei kaam nai k bohi thakibo*) as according to them these girls engage themselves in useless conversations regarding marriage, boys, gossiping about others and also talk about TV serials. Here it can be noticed that Armina and her friends try to distance themselves from the submissive girls as they consider boys to be better than them.

Thus, certain stereotypical ideas about feminine and masculine traits are developed among the students within the school. It was also observed that often the feminine traits were being looked down upon, for instance gossiping is considered as girlish. This, as Reay (2010) argues, does not empower them as women or empower their gender. Because while they try to resist traditional submissive ideas of femininity, they also give a superior power to the boys. When the outgoing girls belittle the submissive girls of the class and identify themselves with the boys to get a powerful status, they tend to reinforce dominant masculinity in the process. This serves to legitimize the gender hierarchies.

Arifa, an Assamese Muslim girl, stated her reasons of avoiding her classmates of East Bengal origin as,

...I hate them because their people are not good. They engage in fights often and their thinking process is different, their women are not good too. Their people do not like us and therefore we don’t like them too. In our class, there are *Miya* girls like Warisa, Tabassum who are well-behaved but still I don’t keep in touch with them much, like not over phone after school, as our thoughts do not match.

These excerpts reflect the ethnic and class identity of the students that becomes important while considering their gendered actions.

#### **4.6 Dress code of school teachers**

The dress code does not remain restricted only to students as we just discussed, but is prevalent among teachers as well. The acceptable dress code for female teachers is *sador mekhela*<sup>1</sup> or *saree*<sup>2</sup> and long pants with shirt/t-shirt for male teachers. Though these rules

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<sup>1</sup> It is the two-piece attire that is usually associated with Assamese women. The mekhela is worn from the waist till the ankle covering the lower part of the body. The sador is worn on top of the mekhela and is

are not written down specifically, yet that is what they adhere to. The female teachers wear *sarees* as well as *sador mekhelas* to school. It was observed that the Hindu female teachers wear *sador mekhelas* mostly; only a few would sometimes wear a *saree*, that too rarely. The Muslim teachers in contrast wear *saree* often on regular school days and *sador mekhela* on special days.

Most women teachers wear bright coloured clothes to school. Clothes were at the centre of discussion in the teachers' common room among the female teachers. Most of them would also adorn themselves with jewellery that complemented their clothing. There was hardly any teacher who did not wear lipstick.

When we look into the dress of the male teachers, they have relatively more freedom in dress, provided it does not appear too casual for school (shorts/half pants). They can be seen wearing shirts/t-shirts (half sleeves/full sleeves) and pants (which varies from jeans to formal pants).

Gender hierarchies often get reflected through control of the women's body. The bodies of women and social constructions of the ideal female form do more than reflect women's position in society. They offer a powerful means for negotiating, redefining and reconceptualising their position (Reischer & Koo, 2004). It is a general established idea that since women come to represent the nation, basically the purity of the nation, therefore they must be guarded. Thus men are empowered often by their control of the women's body. Something as mundane as choosing ones clothing can mean women gain control over their bodies (Wilton, 2012). In the school under study, we have observed that there is a strict surveillance on women's clothing during special events celebrated in the school and in their everyday school life. This dress code is often self-imposed by the teachers on themselves, and it is the senior (age and service period) female teachers of the school who take upon the responsibility to ensure that everyone follows the 'expected' dress code. The image construction of the teacher was an important factor in the school and for the female teachers their dress was considered to be the prime criteria of their image construction in front of the students.

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basically used to cover the upper part of the body. Below the *sador*, a blouse is worn. *Sador mekhela* holds an important place in cultural representation of Assamese women.

<sup>2</sup> It is a piece of cloth worn draped around the body consisting of a length of six yards generally. It is traditionally worn by women from the Indian subcontinent (Oxford University Press).

The teachers of the school believe that their dress plays an important role in creating a lasting image of the teacher in the minds of the students and it also help them to see the desired role model in their teachers. Leathers (1992) defines this process of impression management as “an individual’s conscious attempt to exercise control over selected communicative behaviours and cues- particularly non-verbal cues- for purposes of making the desired impression” (Leathers, 1992, p.204). The function of uniform is not only to be observed as a mere piece of clothing but it acts as a communicative instrument in giving out messages. Goffman (1959) considers cloth to be an important form through which a performer defines or regulates the expectancies from an audience. In the school, the female teachers try to use their cloth to communicate certain ideas to the students. In this matter, the young female teachers agree with the views of the senior teachers, that being teachers they are expected to come wearing decent clothes like *sador mekhela* or *saree*. Also, the students tend to imitate the teachers, and they must appear decent in school. Since they are to set an example to the students, they must appear in a way that students would want to listen to them. Moreover, this tradition of wearing formal clothes is something that they have always seen continuing.

When it comes to decency, the female teachers are supposed to wear their clothes in a way that their body is fully covered. They are expected to wear their *saree/sador mekhela* in a way that their belly and breast are well-covered. They are not to wear their dress too tight to reveal their figure. This is believed to be effective in curtailing the sexualised gaze of the male students on the female teachers.

Since it is a co-educational institution, one cannot be sure as to how the male students of high school look at them. So, it is considered better to come well covered. Moreover, according to them the wearing of *saree* or *sador mekhela* creates a gap between teachers and the students. The students would look at the teachers as an authoritative figure or a senior person. Wearing any other dress might fail to create such an impression. They were of the opinion that if they wore *kurta pajama/salwar* suit or any western clothes to school, the students might not respect them as their teachers and might treat them as their friends. Some of the teachers even pointed out an incident when a teacher, who was obese was identified by the students as ‘the ma’am who wears blouses with a small back’, when they were unable to recall her name. They remembered her by her dressing pattern i.e., her blouses which made her blouse look small because of her body structure.

As mentioned in the chapter earlier, for the male teachers there were no such rules regarding what to wear and what not. On asking the male teachers' views on the dress of female teachers, though individual interviews, most of them, including the principal commented that they have no say regarding their dress and would leave it to the senior female teachers. However, through their conversations it was reflected that they too, like their female colleagues associated the idea of modesty and decency with the wearing of *saree* or *sador mekhela* only. When I asked one of the youngest male teachers, about the wearing of 'traditional attire' of women to school, he responded that it is not about being traditional. He added that unlike universities, in schools' teachers must maintain their image in a way that would not draw attention to their clothes or make them look attractive to the students. Since one has to deal with school students and mostly adolescent male students, one needs to be extra careful about their clothing and therefore the teachers wear *sador mekhela* or *saree*.

#### **4.6.1 Importance of wearing 'decent' clothes**

From the earlier discussion, we are able to understand the importance of maintaining decency in matters of dress for the female teachers. The views of the teachers of both genders are also in consensus regarding what they consider as decent cloth to be worn to the school and that is *sador mekhela* or *saree*.

Emma Tarlo (1996) in *Clothing Matters*, points to the importance of clothing choices for the construction and maintenance of women's identity in India. The image of the Indian woman in a *saree* is banal and pervasive and often goes unnoticed. Of the many ways that everyday nationalism, as argued by Fox and Miller (2008, as cited in Wilton, 2012) can be understood, clothes play a significant role, as a ritual enactment of symbols, and by its everyday consumption. The importance of cloth and clothing goes back to the nationalist resistance period against the British. The importance of cloth to Indian liberation was epitomized by Gandhi, who, as part of promotion of cottage industries and the boycott of foreign goods and industrialization, established the wearing of a plain cotton *khadi* as an assertion of national identity (Jones, 2004, as cited in Wilton, 2012). The importance of the sari for Indian nationalism and national identity is because of *saree*'s relationship to that of the ideal of femininity.

In the school, there are reservations against western attire among the teachers when it involves their dress. Among the female students, primarily among those who belonged to



conservative Muslim family or locality, there are reservations against wearing western dress as according to them that their religion does not allow them to wear jeans, or to dress like a boy.

The teachers are not supportive of their fellow female teachers coming to school in anything other than *sador mekhla/saree*, as according to them it would lower their respect and dignity as teachers in the eyes of the students. One of the views of a female teacher, Meenakshi, fifty-seven years, who joined in the year 1988 and teaches Mathematics regarding dress code is as follows,

When there is election duty or any other non-working days in school, some teachers come wearing *churidar*<sup>3</sup>. But wearing *sador mekhela* or *saree* in school is a tradition, it is a must. In our school one is not supposed to wear *churidar*, maybe in some other school or in English medium school they are allowed to wear, but not here. I feel one can wear *churidar* during working days if they want; there is modesty (*abur*) in it. But I cannot say that regarding wearing it in our school, because no one wears it here. If someone comes wearing it someday too, then people gossip about it. Once a teacher came dressed in a strange manner wearing *palazzo* (flared pants) when there was a training session going on... In working days, she does not wear though.

Another senior female teacher, Archana, fifty-three years, Hindi teacher, responded by saying that,

There is no dress code for male teachers. They can wear whatever they like. But, for female teachers I feel *saree* and *sador mekhela* is best.

When I asked her if she feels there is some kind of imposition on women in matters of dress she responded as,

I don't feel there is any kind of imposition on women. If someone comes wearing *saree* or *sador mekhela* to school, one's personality is reflected, which does not happen while wearing *kurta* or any other dress.

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<sup>3</sup> Long piece of cloth worn by women in India with pants (pajama) below and *Dupatta* (a piece of cloth to cover the chest part)

On addressing the issue of wearing *saree/sador mekhela* to school, a few of the female teachers who would be in their forties expressed that they would love to also wear *salwar* suit to school as they wear it in their regular lives outside school. However, since the senior teachers would not like it, they don't want to offend them or go against them.

Another thirty-five years old young female teacher informed that this tradition of dress is something that she has seen since she was a student in a government school herself. Thus, it can be said that majority of the teachers supported the idea of the unwritten dress code of the school. However, it must be noted that though the views of the senior as well as the junior teachers were in consensus, there was a difference in the way they responded in terms of their tone. While the senior teachers were assertive, the young ones appeared to be submissive and followed what their seniors directed.

Among the teachers in the school, it can be said that most of the teachers attached the idea of modesty, which equated to traditional attire, with the respect that they received from the students. Thus, it can also be said that they use this concept of modesty, which is a part of the gendered disciplinary process, traditionally used as a patriarchal tool to limit women's agency, to assert their power over women.

Many of the female teachers of the study are of the opinion that by accepting the norms of discipline in terms of attire they are able to exert control over themselves (Hahner & Varda, 2012). This acceptance of the idea of decency and traditionalism on the part of the female teachers can be attributed to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. The teachers unaware of the invisible, gentle and unrecognized form of violence submit themselves to the idea of femininity expected by the society, and thereby produce and reproduce the very structure of the society. Symbolic violence works to reveal the temporal differences between various forms of femininity and its practice, and different values attached to its varied forms. Thus, as Skeggs (2004) argues, in the context of the school under study too, we can see that even though the presence of femininity is ubiquitous, it is not symbolically dominant and thus rarely achieves to act as a form of symbolic capital. The women of the school use the idea of 'proper' way of dressing to express their femininity and use it as a tool to exert their power as well. But the fact that they are defined and get respect only by their way of dressing shows that this presence and expression of femininity does not act as a means of symbolic capital in the real sense.

#### 4.6.2 Community, honour and women's attire in school

*Sador mekhela* is the most prestigious attire in the school and therefore in every special occasion, all the teachers, irrespective of their religious and linguistic communities comes wearing *sador mekhela*.

**Figure:** Teachers in *sador mekhela*



This wearing of the *sador mekhela* in school is in contrast to that of *saree*, considering the history of the evolution of *sador mekhela* in Assam. Jones (2004), as cited in Wilton (2012, p.198) argues that 'while the language of clothes can be a major form of political expression, even those not caught up in dramatic or life-threatening political activity find that deciding what to wear involves complex political and social choices, which they often make quite unconsciously. Unlike in Kerala where Muslim women sought alternative to *saree* provide an alternative lens through which women try to choose their idea of the nation (Osella and Osella, 2007), in the context of the present study, the association of *saree* can be seen in a different light. In the school since majority of the Muslim teachers preferred to wear *saree* on regular school days citing comfort as the reason behind it, a few Hindu teachers would associate that with their (Muslim teachers) religious ideas. However, since all the Muslim teachers of the school claimed themselves to be *Goriya* Muslims (in a way distinct from the majority of the students), they wore *sador mekhela* sometimes on normal days, but without fail on special days. This association and affiliation to *sador mekhela* on important days can be traced back to the

construction of the middle-class Assamese woman as *Aideo* as the marker of Assamese identity and middle-class respectability. She was required to ‘dress in mekhela sador, distinct from the *sari*-clad Bengali women, *parbatia* and *Kiratajati* (hill and tribal) women, and the *coolioni* (female coolie)’ (Medhi, 2021, p.17).

#### **4.7 Class, community and gender-based stereotypes among teachers**

In the previous section, we have observed how the female teachers self-impose a dress code on themselves and we also get an idea about their ideas of respectable femininity through clothes. When it concerns the dress of the students, the teachers hold their own estimates of ‘proper’ dress for the students. The views of the teachers are often guided by their own social identity and in this section, we will see the lens that the teachers use to evaluate the students based on their clothes.

##### **4.7.1 Cleanliness and hygiene**

The students are supposed to wear their uniform neatly and present themselves in a tidy manner. Apart from the emphasis on cleanliness of attire, the school also lays out certain conditions of standard/appropriate ways of dress as well as adorning oneself. In the school, there is a wide gap in terms of class, linguistic and ethnic community background of the students and the teachers. Reservations as well as stereotyping of specific characteristics of certain section of students are made by some of the teachers. In teachers’ view, there were some students, especially the boys as compared to girls, whose clothes were not considered as ‘proper’ as it should have been. Here ‘proper’ means clean and fit. This is because some of them would engage in fights or would play games, which would lead to tearing or staining of their clothes. There is a conception among some teachers that apart from the economic background, which limits the students from maintaining hygiene and cleanliness, the ethnic community background of the students plays a part in their appearance too. They often blamed the ethnicity, place of residence, as well as the class background of the students for their inability to maintain the desired level of hygiene.

A *Goriya* Muslim female teacher informed me that in their school they emphasise more on the cleanliness of uniforms, as the students of certain ethnic communities are inherently dirty. She said,

Uniforms of certain students stinks... as you know how they are (referring to their ethnic and class community), their mothers are also not aware of cleanliness and does not look after their uniforms... absence of detergents, being poor affects them too.

Another Hindu Assamese female senior teacher in her late forties claims to help the economically backward but academically bright students as much as she can by providing shoes, bags and other essentials. She mentions that she is aware that not all students can maintain cleanliness of clothes because of their economic condition and therefore she does not think badly about them. But she mentioned (making a nauseated face) that during Ramadan month, it is very difficult to enter the classrooms as the classroom stinks, also the students go out to spit from time to time. This view of the teacher regarding the students is indicative of their prejudice towards lower classes. Thus 'spitting' which is considered filthy normally, becomes twice filthy when done by the poor.

The statements of the teachers, Assamese Hindus and *Goriya* Muslims alike, speaks a lot about the class and ethnic difference between the students and the teachers and their opinions based on that regarding maintenance of discipline in terms of hygiene and cleanliness. The weak financial condition of many students, irrespective of their ethnicity makes them adapt to similar pattern of dressing and habits of cleanliness that are viewed as unclean by the upper classes. However, in this setting the teachers expressed reservations mainly towards students belonging from minority ethnic community. Therefore, working class students from ethnic minority communities are devalued more than the rest.

#### ***4.7.2 Class, gender and status politics***

The standards of adornment and style are affected by stereotypes attached to community identity. To explain this fixation of style/adornment with community identity, the view of a Hindu female teacher of the school is stated below which reflects how students are classified on the basis of their community background.

The teacher, in her words, "as she had to speak frankly" admitted that,

...since majority of the students belong to the Muslim minority community, the makeup of those girls is of a different type. Sometimes they would come wearing

lipstick or earrings; their earring would also be huge in size that is not normal while coming to school... considering that, they like wearing things that shine/glitter. They would like the rubber band for hair only if it is shiny in design. I tell them that it is okay if you wear it, but you must understand when and where to wear it, like you can wear such items while going to occasions like a wedding ceremony. It will look better then... I ask that if they wear these to the school does it look good? Then they would remain silent. Because they are young, and they are not accustomed to the proper culture. Their environment back home is different and therefore they must be made to understand what is appropriate and what is not...

The view of the teacher presents not only a class-based judgment but also indicates devaluation of Muslim groups who are viewed as having 'immigrant' origin in Assam. Thus, from the narratives of the teachers, one could assess that the prejudices are based on an intersection of class, gender and ethnic/religious identity.

The field structure, as Bourdieu (1990) argues is guided by social positions signified by power relations. Through observation of the above narratives, the complexity of relationship between teachers and students in the school may be understood. The students, based on their maintenance of cleanliness or a lack of it and through specific pattern of adornment seemed to present their lack of symbolic capital, and are then assessed by the teachers. Reischer and Koo (2004) says, the process of adornment which makes human beings distinct from other species of the earth, is often guided by cultural narratives and it is often the culture of the privileged that gets recognized and due respect.

As mentioned by Bourdieu, cultural capital always gets associated with high cultural practices and classifications and as Skeggs (2004) argues, in terms of gender, apart from middle class femininity, it is difficult to treat different forms of femininity as a form of capital. Poover (1984), as mentioned in Skeggs (2004), said that the idea of femininity was in affinity with the habitus of the upper class, which was characterized by certain features of behaviour and dress. Thus, there was a direct co-relation between conduct and appearance. Bourdieu talks about the inseparability of aesthetic disposition from specific forms of cultural competence. This competence is recognized by the taste that people display in their practices and appearance (Skeggs, 2004).

Through the statement of the teacher, the idea that femininity is actually a ‘classed sign, of a particular form of womanhood’ (Skeggs, 2004, p. 313), was legitimated. The fact that students were assumed to lack the knowledge of dressing and were supposed to learn the proper way of dressing up in different spaces, signifies the teachers’ position of class power. Here, the teacher as a symbol of middle-class women and the student as the symbol of lower class/community, enables the former to judge the later to be lacking in femininity and hence respectability. The student was considered to lack a particular form of consumer knowledge that would have guided her how, what, and where to display a particular form of adornment (Skeggs, 2004).

Thus, the perspectives of the teachers on the students, based on their class, age difference, gender and ethnic/religious community reiterates the argument made by Morris (2005), that the conflict between adult and student is immensely complex. It is particularly visible when it concerns school standards of dress and behaviour and would portray a blend of misconception, as well as an array of control and resistance. This acceptance of femininity to be practiced in a certain way by male as well as female teachers shows how femininity is ‘misrecognised as a natural, essentialised personal disposition’ (Skeggs, 2004, p.23).

In the school, it was also observed that decency regarding Indian attire was not considered part of traditional, but an integral part of being a woman and as something normal/mundane when it comes to women. Thus, while there are strong views in the school regarding girls’ clothing, the school authorities are not very strict in terms of boys’ clothing. This according to the teachers as well as many students is that, because boys do not have much option of variety in terms of clothing, they do not think much about it.

The thing that matters for boys is just their hairstyle and therefore the school authorities check that they maintain a ‘decent’ haircut.

Moreover, the male students coming from a lower economic background and with a stigmatized social status were viewed as threatening or having a sexual gaze towards the female teachers. The female teachers express such fears and exercise self-control by adopting formal, modest and authoritative ways of dressing to school. Femininity is the process through which women are gendered and become specific sorts of women (Skeggs, 2004). The women of the school accept the idea of a ‘good’ woman and try to

adhere to it. This perception of women regarding dress sense in a socially acceptable manner leads to the reproduction of women as self-regulating subjects. The institutionalisation of the dress code disciplines the female body leading to the production of the desired female body (Lahiri & Bandyopadhyay, 2012).

The emphasis on motherhood and the responsibility entrusted on women gets expressed when considering the idea of discipline with regards to appearance of the students. It is observed that the onus of making the students appear presentable (clean and tidy) for the school is on the mother of the students. Since the mothers of the students are mostly illiterate and come from a certain class, cultural and ethnic background, the responsibility of improving their child in this respect is not entrusted to them by the school authorities, nor are they expected to be capable enough to guide their wards. The consideration of the mothers as lacking in these skills is attributed to their background by the teachers. For instance, when the uniforms of the students were dirty, the teachers attributed it to the lack of cultural capital of the mothers of the students.

#### **4.8 Punishments and ideas about ‘bad students’**

In the school, it is notice that when there is mischief done by the students, regardless of gender, the teachers punish the students. These punishments range from slapping, beating with a twig, wooden stick, or ruler; making them kneel- down; calling the parents and, in extreme cases, expulsion of the student. It is noticed that mostly the young female teachers do not resort to use of physical force when there is any disruption of discipline. Apart from that overall, the teachers try to minimize the use of physical force or punishments upon the students. Among the female teachers, it is the senior teachers who resort to physical means more to punish the students, while for the male teachers no such classification can be made clearly as to the use and non-use of physical means to discipline the students. As mentioned, a few teachers are actively involved in the maintenance of discipline within the school. Among them, the students expressed their fear for two senior female teachers and two male teachers exclusively. One of the senior female teachers, Purabi, fifty-six years, who teaches Assamese and is entrusted the responsibility of maintaining discipline expressed her thoughts behind asking the students not to mix up with the opposite gender as,



We tell the female students not to mix up with the male students much as the male students are very naughty (*Kua hoi j lora bilakdustotu, besi mix up nokoribi,...tenekekou.*)

Here, the fear of the female students being maligned by coming in close contact with the male students was an issue of concern for her as she believed that the female students need to be protected from the ‘bad boys’ of the school and one way of doing that was by restricting the intermingling of students of opposite gender.

Jadav, a teacher in his forties, who is feared by almost all the students because of his strictness and punishments, blamed the starting of co-education system in the school as leading to new problems in terms of discipline. He also points out the student background as one of the reasons behind the practice of undisciplined behaviour in the school. He says,

We try to observe and control our students as much as we can within the school premises. We are not aware where they go during leisure, but still we try to keep an eye on them. These are the demerits of co-education (laughs)... female students have joined now, but the female students who come are not good... majority of them comes from bad environment.

Thus, even as the school tries to maintain its gendered code of discipline to the maximum, at times it is not able to maintain it. There is a dual understanding regarding the students’ behaviour based on their background and the ways in which their actions should be addressed. A few teachers, especially the female young teachers, feel that since the students are young and they come from unrefined cultural background, they tend to behave in an inappropriate manner. Regarding this, they believe that when the students are made to understand about their actions and imparted the knowledge of good behaviour, they will understand. These teachers were of the view that lack of exposure has made the students prone to such actions and if guided properly, they can improve themselves by learning the know-how of ‘good’ society.

However, the other interpretation of a few teachers, especially those who had been in the school for a long period is that, based on the cultural background of the students that it was impossible to make the students learn without the use of force. They informed that

this unruly behaviour of the students leaves them with no option, but to punish each student regardless of their gender.

The punishments include the ones that have been mentioned above and are of the same intensity for the male students as well as female students. Justifying the equal punishments meted out to the students, Anjuma, a senior teacher gave her views as,

We cannot give concession on the basis of sex to the female students as these students of our school are very notorious. They are bad in studies and once we move out of the classroom they howl along with the male students with the same intensity and make noises. Now after the introduction of co-education we have started facing a new problem. The students exchange love letters, one has even attempted cutting his wrist... such instances take place. In these cases, we call the guardians and take it in writing that such incidents would not be repeated. Till the parents come, the students are made to kneel down in the principal's room.

The use of force among boys and girls is dealt with similar physical punishments by the teachers. However, when the altercations take place between girls, the teachers again blame their upbringing and family background as the reason of their behaviour. For instance, once two girls belonging to *Mymensingia* community fought among themselves over an issue of boys. The girl hit her classmate as her classmate used to tease her with a boy every day. This made her very angry which made her hit her friend first, eventually leading both into a physical fight, because of which the former fractured her hand. Teachers at the school punished them and changed their sections to maintain peace in the classroom. Following this incident, the teachers explained to me that it is of no use telling them not to fight, as they will not listen. As it is common in their locality to witness fights among their neighbours, they feel that they tend to engage in such actions more. However, they also added that though these particular girls are like that, not every girl of similar background would engage in such activities. According to them there are good girls coming from such background as well.

The students at this school primarily belong to the working-class background and from the views of the teachers it can be ascertained that the control mechanism imposed on the students, is guided by their assessments of class and sometimes ethnic community background of the students. The teachers situated at a middle-class position and belonging to the powerful community of the society in relation to the students, find it

easy to attribute the activities of the students to their background. Here, gender definitions are constructed using the yardstick of the ruling class ideas of masculinity and femininity (Arnot, 2002). There is a continuous intersection of gender, class, and community identity in the school under study.

In the school, the dominant culture of the social world is maintained by considering certain actions and behaviours of the students as lacking in standards, and in need of refinement owing to their 'deficient' culture and economic background. This standard culture of refinement that is sought to be achieved by the teaching community (dominant sections of the society) and the dismissal of the culture of those who belong to the weaker (those not in power, i.e. the ethnic minority and financially weak) group is considered to be normal and accepted.

From the views of the teachers, it can be ascertained that the female students, considering their working-class background are considered and looked at as a threat, because of their sexuality. Their sexuality is therefore considered best if tamed or brought under control through disciplinary mechanisms. These students are also entrusted with the task to maintain (protect) themselves on their own. Unlike the male students, who are not told directly to 'save' themselves from their female classmates. So, we can see how based on the background of the students, girls are expected to protect themselves on one hand, while on the other hand their sexuality is considered as a threat to others. The working-class girls of this school are looked at by their teachers as unruly and undisciplined in terms of control of sexuality and mannerisms. The characteristics associated with femininity such as being silent, invisible, and composed are considered unlikely to be displayed by them (Skeggs, 2002).

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

Thus, the school is guided by disciplinary mechanism, which dictates the entire schooling process. This disciplinary mechanism is highly gendered in practice and is moulded in the gender norms of culture followed by the dominant class. It was also seen that when it comes to women, an idea of respectable femininity is constructed based on class, caste, and community. This construct is to be emulated by all in their conduct and appearances. The role of women as mothers, expected of the women teachers as well as parents, is invoked from time to time in the school. This idea of the assumed role of motherhood for the teachers again depend upon the similarity of the teachers with the

students in terms of class, culture and ethnic background. Amongst all these disciplinary mechanisms, the students and the teachers through their resistance find out means to exert their will by either complying with the rules or by openly resisting them.

The female teachers of the school entrust the responsibility of maintaining decency and proper sense of dress on themselves, which often resonates with the middle-class feminine ideal. Male teachers hold a similar view on the dressing code of female teachers. But they were rarely seen to be much critical about it. This may be because the concept of a modest dress code for female teachers is well established and taken for granted. Thus, while the dress of female teachers always remains a matter of concern in the school premises, the dress of male teachers goes unnoticed. This absence of surveillance of the male body is practiced by “erasing the sexed specificity of the individual male body.” This makes the male body an invisible one and makes its appearance normal and neutral in a public space (Collier, 1998, p.34, as cited in Entwistle, 2000). Bourdieu calls these/this phenomena of the self-regulating middle class as operating as a ‘class for themselves’, which has become quite apparent on a large scale (Skeggs, 2004). The body of the women is always considered a sexual body which needs to be controlled. This concept of a sexualised female body has not been done away even after attaining partial gender equality. From this, it can be considered that women are seen to be located in their bodies, while men are seen as beyond their bodies. Even when fully covered, women are not able to free themselves from the ‘baggage of sexual meanings’ (Entwistle, 2000, p.343). Women are on the one hand expected to exercise self-control, while the male gaze that is the reason behind making a certain form of attire look indecent, is never tamed or questioned (Lahiri & Bandyopadhyay, 2012). Lesko (1988) was of the view that dress code in school emphasizes modesty and restraint and establish the belief that girls’ bodies and sexualities are in particular need of control and are dangerous when not restricted by the powerful other in the equation.