

CHAPTER 5

NATION, REGION AND GENDER: SANKARDEVA SCHOOL

5.1 Introduction

The culture that prevails in a given school influences and gives rise to the development of group identities there. Schools in India offer a disputed landscape driven by multiple ideologies; formed by local histories and political forces (Benei, 2007; LaDousa, 2014; Srivastava, 2005). The school under study in this chapter is guided by Hindu nationalist ideology which is basically the ideology of the members of the neo-Hindu right-wing groups' socio-political movement. One of Hindu nationalisms' unique characteristics is its idea of the creation of a sacred geography consisting of people of 'Indic' religions like Sikhism, Buddhism, or Jainism but excluding adherents of 'foreign' religions like Islam and Christianity. There is a strong emphasis on common culture (*sanskriti*), which is employed very specifically and this culture is based on devotion to a specific holy geography (Deshpande, 2004). Gopalakrishnan (2006, op.cit.) says that Hindu nationalism creates a cultural nationalism, considering 'origins' of India as a Hindu civilisation (Sriprakash & Possamai, 2011). In the Hindu nationalist discourse on culture and tradition, the concept of 'national' is confounded with the notion of being 'Hindu' which is defined via citizenship standards, based on terminologies of 'authenticity', 'foreignness', and 'sons of the land' (Bannerji, 2006, p. 365). By doing so, they advocate a meaning of secularisation that is based on a Hindu majoritarian (Rao, 2004; as cited in Sriprakash & Possamai, 2011).

The school under study was set up in 1982 and is situated in an urban locality, which is inhabited predominantly by upper caste Hindus. The school is run by the Vidya Bharti (VB) Organisation¹ of India and is the second such school established in Assam by the organisation. It is not funded by the government or by the Vidya Bharti Organisation, but instead is funded by student fees (which range from 200 to 550 rupees per month, depending on the grade of the student) and donations from some people – well-known figures of Nagaon and a few parents of students. It mainly attracts students from lower middle-class families, who look for Assamese medium schools for their children. The

¹ Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Siksha Sansthan is the educational wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

school has a reputation for instilling values of ethical conduct and discipline among students.

The main goal of the school as mentioned in the school diary and in the VB website is – “To develop a national system of education which would help building a generation of young men and women that is committed to Hindutva and infused with patriotic fervor; physically, vitally, mentally and spiritually fully developed; capable of successfully facing challenges of life; dedicated to the service of those of our brothers and sisters who dwell in villages, forests, caves and slums; and are deprived and destitute, so that they are liberated from the shackles of social evils and injustice and thus devoted, may contribute to build up a harmonious, prosperous, and culturally rich nation” (Vidya Bharati).

5. 2 Introducing the school population

This chapter looks at the students and teachers of the school as the prime participants of the study. A study of the school population helps to examine the culture that is being promoted in the school. It will also help to recognise the forms of identity in terms of language, culture and religion that are sought to be produced and reproduced.

5.2.1 Teachers’ composition and recruitment

The total number of teachers in the school was thirty-nine at the time of the study. There are twenty-nine female and ten male teachers. In terms of caste, the upper-caste groups occupy the highest number, seventeen; followed by the Other Backward Caste eight, Scheduled Caste three, Scheduled Tribe one.

Out of them, twenty-nine are female teachers and nine are male, including the principal. There are three additional staff members, who work as menial workers. These are two women, who are mainly responsible for making tea for the school staff and looking after small students when they fall sick. The third person is a male and acts as the gate keeper of the school. The principal of the school Mr. Sarkar along with another male teacher are the only members who have *Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh* (RSS) affiliation.

The teachers’ recruitment process in the school consists of a written test, followed by an interview. The written examination consists of general knowledge as well as questions related to the subject concerned. In the interview panel, the principal and members of the

school trust, i.e. the president and the vice president remain present. The president and vice-president are well-known people of Nagaon. The senior teachers of the school have expressed that with each consecutive year, the recruitment process gets tougher. While all the teachers have to face the interview process before being inducted, there are some who were recruited on the basis of recommendation from the existing teachers. Individuals who have studied in *Sankardeva Sishu Niketans* (SSN) are given a priority as they are supposed to share and hold similar values.

The school emphasises on Hindu culture. It expects the women teachers to embody values of nurturing and caring. A teacher named Mouchumi, who teaches Sanskrit and has been in service for more than a decade recalled her interview day and expressed that of all the questions that were asked, one question touched her heart which she still remembers. The question was to identify the similarities between a nurse and a teacher. To which she answered,

As a nurse devotes her life for the well-being of the patients, similarly a teacher devotes her life for the well-being of the students. A teacher like a nurse would see to it that her students, no matter their merit or economic background, would be able to achieve success and be a good human being.

Another teacher named Nayana, who teaches Mathematics, said that when she appeared for the interview she was asked to recite the *Prata Smarana Shloka*, the morning chant, which her father taught her at a very young age. She was also asked to sing the *Saraswati Vandana* (hymn to Goddess *Saraswati*) and was asked a few questions related to general knowledge.

Another important factor that is mentioned to the would-be-teachers at the time of interview is that the salary of the school would be very low. They are asked to consider it as a *manoni* or honorarium and not as salary for their service. The salary of the teachers ranges from 4500 rupees to 15,000 rupees.

The teachers are also informed during the interview about the form of relationship that they should develop with the students of the school. The teachers are supposed to have a parent like approach towards the students, i.e. to correct them when they are wrong, at the same time to love them as their own. Considering the minimal salary, the teachers who continue to work in the school, do so because of a few reasons. The young teachers

(both male and female) who are engaged in the school and are relatively new in service remain in the school with the intention that as soon as they get another ‘good’ (in terms of money) job, they will leave this school. Most of the female teachers who were married and in their forties, explained that they were doing the job to have an identity of their own. Being married into families where husbands were the primary earners, they viewed their jobs more in terms of respect than economic necessities. A few teachers, especially middle-aged male teachers informed that they remained in the school being guided by sentimental values to the school organisation and attachment to school children. These teachers can be said to be partially influenced by the ideology of the school. They did not associate themselves with the ideology of Hindutva but were influenced by the school’s ideology of shaping the students to be good citizens for the nation, to consider the students as their own. Lastly, a few senior and aged teachers were kept in the school on humanitarian grounds unanimously by the staff members and organising members. They represented senior citizenship and were believed to add value to the school in terms of age.

Whatever might be the situation behind joining the school, most of the teachers try to develop a good relationship with the students. This relationship is something that is mentioned by most of the teachers, parents as well as students of the school. Bishnu Chatterjee, fifty-two years, social science teacher, who is among the founding members of the school states regarding this bond with the students as,

We are not paid much here, so I cannot say that I do not feel bad about it... some household problems arise sometimes... but staying with the students for so long, when I look at their faces, I feel good. I feel peace knowing that I am able to do something for their good. I got a job once earlier, but I was not allowed to go by my family then as the job was not in Nagaon district.

The relationship of the teachers and students as guardian and child respectively – of the school as a family – is one thing that is often spoken about in the school meetings and functions that take place and in everyday conversations as well.

However, the criteria for women to be the caring one is considered the most essential and sought for quality, as compared to male teachers. Once a student of KG II came to the teachers’ common room crying in pain as he was suffering from stomach pain. The women teachers then took some medicine available from the first aid box and gave it to

the student, while at the same time caressing him. The student was made to sit in the room till he was alright. After this incident, Arpita, a female teacher in her forties, told me that unlike English medium or other schools, here they develop a kind of familial relationship with the students. She said with pride that the ex-students of their school visit the school even after completing their studies several years ago.

5.2.2 Training period

Teachers of the school must undergo two mandatory training sessions. These are:

- i. A seven days programme to be undertaken within fifteen days of their appointment,
- ii. A fifteen days programme that must be undertaken within one year of joining to ensure their permanent appointment.

The training period centers on five themes of the VB system – Sanskrit, physical education, *yoga*, *sangeet* (music), and moral and spiritual education. These are known as *panchapidixaadhar fut* (five elements). The focus of the training period is to develop the teachers academically, morally, habitually, behaviourally, and to train them in Hindu ideals. They were also taught subjects that helped in nation building and promoting the cultures and traditions of India. This includes subjects such as *vedic ganit* (vedic mathematics), *banbasi adhyayan* (tribal education), *swadeshi jagran* (consciousness of ones' nation). In terms of culture, the teachers were trained in Assamese, Hindi, Sanskrit languages and in RSS songs and stories from Hindu epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata. Emphasis was also laid on instilling feelings of patriotism and nationalism.

5.2.3 Student population

The total strength of students in the school was 729, with more than half of them being girls. The students, like the teachers are predominantly upper caste Hindus with some representation of students from lower caste groups and complete absence of people from other religions. Among students, the largest proportion of students comes from upper castes groups (58.71%), followed by the Other Backward Classes (35.11%), and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (5.21% and 0.96%, respectively). For the study, I closely examined thirty-five students of Class VIII till they reached Class X. I used a questionnaire to get an idea of their social and economic background.

This school, being a private school, and committed to a vision of Hindu nationalism, does not take any student from other religious communities, particularly Muslims. This feature of the school makes it stand out as unique considering its location in a district where Muslims are a majority. The teachers informed that Muslim students are deliberately not admitted in the school because they feel that such students would feel uncomfortable singing Hindu prayers on a daily basis and performing Hindu rituals such as chanting the Om mantra.

5.3 Relation between nation and region

Given the ideological slant of the school, and its location in the state of Assam, which is known for its history of regional identity movements, I examined the relation between the symbols of national and regional identity in the school. It can be examined by understanding the history of the Sankardeva schools in Assam in general and the celebration of national and regional icons within school premises.

5.3.1 History of the school

By observing the SSN schools' history and the naming of them after Sankardeva in Assam, it can be understood how the relationship between nation and regional identity is established by these schools. *Saraswati Shishu Mandir*, the first school affiliated with the Vidya Bharati (VB) group, was established in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh in 1952. These schools under VB group then gradually spread to other states, and many schools were established within a few years. Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan was founded in 1977, with registered offices in Lucknow and Delhi². In time, state-level committees were set up to manage the educational activities in different regions. An affiliate body named *Shishu Shiksha Samiti* was formed in Assam in April 1979. The first school under this organisation was set up in the same year at Ambikagiri, Guwahati (Anderson & Damle, 1987). More than 500 such schools are operational across the state of Assam, and it is one of the largest networks of private schools in the state and in India. These schools, like their counterparts in other states, are known for instilling discipline, and a cultural and moral orientation, among students based on the ideals of Hindu nationalism. However, unlike the schools in the rest of India, the schools in Assam are named SSN after the Vaishnava saint, Srimanta Sankardeva of medieval Assam. Most of

² <https://vidyabharti.net/about-vidya-bharati>

these schools in the Brahmaputra valley are Assamese medium as in this area of Assam, Assamese-speaking caste Hindu population comprise the majority population.

5.3.1.1 Sankardeva's legacy in Assam

Sankardeva holds a distinct position in Assamese social and religious life as the founder of the *Mahapuruxia* sect in Vaishnava Renaissance. He was born into a family of Sakta Kayastha, overlord of the Bara-Bhuyans at Bardowa (present-day Nagaon district) in the year 1449 (Neog, 2011). Despite being a medieval saint, Sankardeva was hailed as the key symbol of modern Assamese nationalism in the twentieth century. Prior to the twentieth century, the Vaishnava faith had a wide spectrum of followers among different castes of Hindu society. However, it was neither used as a subject of nationalist or aesthetic discourse, nor was it used as a core of Assamese regional identity.

Sankardeva was instrumental in uniting people from diverse castes, communities, and religions in Assam. Laxminath Bezborua was the chief person behind the resurrection of Sankardeva as the regional icon. (Choudhury, 2014; Sharma, 2006). He is regarded as the pioneer of modern Assamese literature and was instrumental in the development of an Assamese nationalist consciousness in the early decades of the twentieth century. Bezbaroa's ideas and literary contributions towards Assamese language gained prominence during this period. He was influenced by the Bengal Renaissance, but he was aware of the unsuitability of this approach in awakening an Assamese nationalist

consciousness, as Assam consisted of diverse ethnic communities. He understood the significance of common symbols in language and religion in nation building. He was actively involved in developing Assamese as a language of education, and reviving Sankardeva's religious ideas (Choudhury, 2014). During that period the works of linguists like Banikanta Kakati also helped in establishing the historical legitimacy of the modern Assamese literary tradition by connecting it to the religious texts of the medieval era. This projects' chief aim was to establish Assamese as the *Jatiya bhaxa* (regional language) and to recognise Sankardeva as the *Jatiya guru* (regional mentor). The works of Bezborua which highlights the *Mahapuruxia* tradition as a distinct form of Vaishnavism, in relation to Bhakti tradition in India, can also be seen in the same light.

Various scholars have analysed and commented on such regional affirmations of nationalist traditions, which have had a curious connection with the pan-Indian national

movement in many respects. These regional and nationalist affirmation at times seamlessly merge and sometimes they are at odds with each other. However, from independence onward till the decades of linguistic reorganisation of the states, mobilisations on questions of common language gained prominence over that of common religious symbols in Indian politics (Brass, 2004). The regional political discourse in Assam, explicitly in linguistic terms, was shaped by the specificity of the political equations with Eastern Bengal. The protection of the Assamese language became the rallying point for the native Assamese leaders. The perception about Assamese identity was based on the continuous emphasis on a common language. This Assamese identity based on common linguistic identity was applied on the sensitive subject of identifying a foreigner, during the anti-foreigner movement of 1980s. This does not mean that this identifying procedure was entirely devoid of the stress on Hindu imagery. Here, we seek to present how given the specific historic context of regional politics in Assam, shared linguistic identity was given precedence over religious ones.

5.3.1.2 Politics behind the naming of the school

Schools in the state of Assam must be seen in this broader context. It is worth noting that the first SSN network schools were established at a period when the anti-foreigner movement was at its height in the state of Assam. Moreover, adopting the name of a regional icon must have facilitated their admission into a non-Hindi state at a time when the movement was attempting to define a foreigner along linguistic rather than religious grounds. Naming the schools in the state after Sankardeva allows them to portray their educational goals in an acceptable way to the majority of the state's Assamese-speaking people, without compromising on Hindu symbols.

However, certain tensions and conflicts arises, while trying to blend the national and the regional in the education ideological arena. The process of nation-building (*Rashtra nirmana*), as mentioned in the objectives of Vidya Bharati Trust, the nation-building process cannot simply be transformed into the *Jatiya gathan* process envisioned in Assamese nationalist debates. It is due to the dissonance, which arises due the conflict between a regional and a pan-Indian articulation of a community identity.

5.3.2 The school premise and the visual symbols of the nation

According to Christopher Pinney, the origin of Hindu nationalism can be traced to the modern times and it has a fascination with the politics of nostalgia. It is combined with new visual technologies which ranges from the mobile video *rath* (chariot) to the multiple colour posters (Pinney, 1997). In her work, Froerer (2007) refers to this display of pictures of important historical leaders of the early RSS and Hindutva movement on VB schools as ‘politicisation of the school space’. The images of Hindu gods and goddesses present in the school premises is also mentioned by Nandini Sundar (2004). According to her, the school space is rendered an extension of a Hindu temple by the presence of these religious images.

The school's premises present a visual assemblage of several symbols representing national and regional histories of nation-building and religious figures. These symbols are often put together ignoring the conflictual aspects of their histories. A large image of Swami Vivekananda can be seen while entering the school gate, in the front yard, which commemorates his 150th birth anniversary with the theme, ‘Wake up Bharat! Enlighten the world!’ Vivekananda’s portrait can also be seen in the principal’s room along with the images of Bharat Mata, Goddess *Saraswati*, Lord Shiva and B. R.Ambedkar. The teachers' common room has a more varied landscape, with pictures of religious figures like Krishna and Guru Nanak flanked by regional political and cultural figures like Gopinath Bordoloi, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, in addition to leaders from the Hindu right like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and K.B. Hedgewar. Images of diverse traditions can be seen in the classrooms as well.

Each classroom of the school is assigned a name drawn from varied sources which include an eclectic mix of Hindu mythological tradition with nationalist icons, which is displayed on a sheet of paper and pasted on the walls outside. Some of these names are recognisable only within the region. Names of mythological figures which are displayed include Ram; Lav and Kusha; Dhruva, Bhakta Prahlad and Abhimanyu. Guru Gobind Singh, Madhavdev, and Vivekanand are among the religious and spiritual lecturers. Shivaji, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Veer Chilarai, Lachit Barphukan, and Kanaklata are among the national and historical personalities whose names are pasted on the walls outside the classroom. These visual images are placed where the students spend most of their time, assuming to evoke feelings of reverence

towards them. The blend of religious and the national figures may also be used to foster specific ideas about nationality among teachers as well as students. The repeated display of these images in various locations, such as in textbooks, reference books, and other educational resources, define the school environment in certain ways, which have implications on how the relationship between the area and the country is envisioned in the educational setting.

5.3.2.1 Negotiating Sankardeva's ideals

Taking clue from our discussion on evoking Sankardeva as the *Jatiya Guru* of *Mahapuruxia* tradition in the Assamese nationalist project in the early twentieth century, we can examine the shifts in the meaning of the religious creed at two different moments. The religion of Sankardeva in the previous century was projected to have been based on principles of monotheism and was against idol-worship. It drew on the Bhagavata Purana and consisted of a monotheistic doctrine called *Eksharana nama dharma*, which means surrender to the supreme Brahma and his words, i.e. Basudeva or Krishna (Neog, 2011). It is also believed that only by worshipping Krishna, all other Gods are worshipped. This can be found in one of Sankardeva's verses saying that, as the branches, leaves and foliage of a tree are nourished by pouring water at the root of the tree, all Gods and Goddesses are propitiated by the worship of Krishna (Deka, 2017). These ideas were invoked by Bezborua in his commentaries on Sankardeva's religious tradition (Bezborua, 2004). In this school, similar verses, emphasising the monotheistic doctrine of the saint were displayed prominently on the blackboards only on the day of Sankardeva Jayanti celebration in the school. However, on all other days, through its visual production and in its curricular practices, the school did not disseminate similar ideas. On the foundation day of the school, for example, images of *Saraswati*, Bharat Mata and the Om mantra were placed near the stage, underlining the common project of celebrating the nation through symbols of Hindu dharma. An underlying unity between symbols of Hinduism is stressed upon in this school in their important celebrations as well. The school calendar like most other Assamese medium schools of Assam includes observation of both *Saraswati* puja and Sankardeva tithi. Though the former sees much larger participation of students and teachers.¹¹ *Saraswati* Puja in this school is always performed by an invited Brahmin priest.

In one of the reflective moments, the school principal tried justifying the naming of the school after the revered saint of Assam Sankardeva by suggesting that he (Sankardeva) apart from having made key contributions to Assamese art and literature, is also the *jyestha putra* (the eldest son) of *Saraswati*. Through this he attempts to establish familial relation between the mythical figure of *Saraswati* and the revered saint Sankardeva using the sacred trope of an undivided Hindu family. In this effort, the regional religious figure is encompassed within the pan-Indian Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism.

Most of the teachers and students at the school did not seem to notice any conflict in practice of idol worship and celebrating Sankardeva's ideas simultaneously. While this could be indicative of the success of the ideological leanings of the organisation, it can also be attributed to a general decline in following the practice of monotheism and anti-idolatry in Assamese society because of the emergence of Brahminic practices after the death of the saint. The gradual decline of the practice of only following *Naam Kirtan* and of abjuring idol worship is reported to have started after the death of Sankardeva when disputes about claims to his legacy started among his followers and led to the emergence of many factions (Nath, 2011, 2014). In some accounts, institutionalisation of *Mahapuruxia* tradition in the form of *Satras* has led to a greater acceptance of Brahmanical norms in rituals practices (Sharma, 2006, as cited in Bora, 2017).

Most participants found a sense of continuity between what they saw at school and at home and other places. For example, one of the teachers who was specifically asked about the principle of monotheism, gave the example of the significance of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh in Hindu spiritual life. They continued to invoke the verses of Sankardeva which stress on monotheism and deride idol-worshippers, but have also learnt to adapt themselves to mainstream Hindu practices of visiting temples for idol-worship in their life outside school.

Students also did not seem to be conscious about the ideas of Sankardeva from within the *Mahapuruxia* tradition and were even less aware about the potential conflict between different traditions of Hinduism. Though some of them knew about the basic tenet of worshipping a single God, i.e. Krishna, worshipping others was not seen as a matter of contention. Like their teachers, they worshipped images of Gods and Goddess in their homes and kept them at study tables for good omen. But, they read with great interest

about extraordinary feats of Sankardeva in school and almost hero worshipped him through tales given in textbooks.

In many ways, therefore, the school projects a harmony between religious elements of Assamese nationalist tradition and Hindu nationalism by creating a common space where both could be celebrated and the tensions between the two could be eased out. Without getting into the controversies about the essential form of *Mahapuruxia* tradition in Assam, it is significant to notice the similarities and differences in the way Sankardeva is evoked in the schools named after him as part of a Hindu national project and the way it was interpreted by Bezborua in the early decades of the twentieth century.

5.4 Language and identity politics

Language, as according to many nationalist policies, plays a crucial role in binding a nation as a unified imagination. In the school under study, Sanskrit is accorded the place to bring forth a pan-Indian imagination, while Assamese as a medium of instruction caters to the sentiments of the local population.

5.4.1 Primacy accorded to Sanskrit

The role of Sanskrit in the Hindu nationalist project is of great importance. It is seen as providing a unifying element to the variety of linguistic traditions that are native to the holy geographical space called India (Savarkar, 1969). Therefore, teaching and learning of Sanskrit is one of the core components of the curricula in VB schools.

In addition to the formal school syllabi, Sanskrit learning is included in the five principles (*panchapidixadharbhut*) that must guide the curricular principles of schools. The school calendar that is available to the teachers prominently features these five guiding principles. According to the teachers, these principles serve as basis of the mandated teacher education programmes that the VB Trust occasionally sponsors. In the school calendar also it is mentioned that Sanskrit is not just a language, but is signifier of the vibratory power of sound itself which is regarded as the embodiment of energy in its letters and sounds. Sanskrit is held in high regard for being the *Devabani* or the language of the Gods. Sanskrit acquires a special position in the nationalist discourse through its assertions that it is the language of the divine and the wellspring of all energy. As Sumathi Ramaswami (1999) had observed in her work, before Sanskrit can make claims of being the national language, its status as the prestige language of high ritual,

scholasticism and elite culture also needs to be popularised. However, those who work toward its popularisation would have us think that Sanskrit “is not just one part of the whole that is “India”, or even its most important part, but that it is constitutive of every part that makes up the whole” (Ramaswami,1999,p. 341). Through this, they try to mask all the heterogeneities of the nation and portray India as one. Sanskrit was therefore recast as a language of ‘culture’ and ‘morality’ for all, rather than as a sacred language with access only to a limited people (Ramaswami, 1999, p.379). Sanskrit language includes scriptures and texts like *Upanishads*, *Gita*, *Vedas*, which are said to be the foundation of Hinduism. These books are associated with Hindu sensibility and as a result eventually bring people into a Hindu fold.

Belief in Sanskrit of having this unifying potential was most clearly stated by Jana Sangh, the political party. This party was most directly associated with the Hindu right in Indian politics in the 1960s and 70s, when Indian polity was rife with linguistic issues. In 10th July 1965 Jana Sangh party in its resolution, presented an elaborate version of its official language policy emphasising the principles of *swarajya* or self-rule. They stressed the need to promote Hindi as the link language, giving equal status to all Indian languages while emphasising the role of Sanskrit as the source of all Indian languages in this resolution. Regarding the use of language at school level, they proposed that Sanskrit is to be given a pan-Indian role, followed by the regional language and Hindi. English is to be offered as an elective subject (Jaffrelot, 2007). Given the regional linguistic sentiments in the Indian political situation at the time, such a formal declaration of equality for all Indian languages implies a pragmatic step. Their solution also recognises Sanskrit as the ‘one common mother language’ and asserts that giving equal status to all Indian languages does not undermine the unity of the Indian nation (Jaffrelot,2007). Advocacy of the primacy of Sanskrit along with the recognition of other Indian languages is compatible with the ideological underpinnings of the political party in question. Based on such linguistic views of Jana Sangh, similar organisations, particularly the Vidya Bharati organisation, benefited a lot. These organisations, earlier perceived as having stronger roots in the Hindi-speaking areas of North India, were now able to spread into non-Hindi-speaking regions like Assam. The twin processes of privileging Sanskrit while promoting the regional language is followed avidly in the present school. In this school, Sanskrit is one of the compulsory subjects from grade two onwards at different levels.

Even the motto of the school is written in Sanskrit, *swayamevamrigendrata* which means to be a leader by virtue of ones' own deeds. The importance of Sanskrit can also be seen through its usage in the everyday prayer sessions of the school, which are followed with regularity and discipline. However, it is interesting to note that the school use Assamese script for presentation of the prayers, even for the Sanskrit verses in the prayer book. A congruity between the regional and the national symbolic order is sought to be achieved at the surface level through this strategy, as it can be seen that except the prayer sessions primacy is given to Sanskrit and Sanskritik elements in all other aspects of school life.

5.4.2 Teachers' views on language

One of the Sanskrit teachers of the school explains the importance of the language in general and explains the moral importance that the language embodies by mentioning the Sanskrit *Shlokas* which she considers necessary to be imparted to the students. She expresses her disappointment as Sanskrit is not spoken in daily interaction by most of the students and the school has not been able to implement it as strictly as it is supposed to.

The view of the teacher, Mochumi who teaches Sanskrit is that,

Sanskrit is an Indian language which has everything in it. If one reads this language one cannot be easily diverted to a bad path or would not indulge in bad activities. When students from a young age are taught *Shlokas*, they get to learn the moral principles of life, of the hurdles that they might face in their life and develop their love and respect for their parents who are the 'gurus' of one's life whose debt can never be paid. As Sanskrit has such great teachings within it, our school gives much importance to it.

To bring about fluency in Sanskrit among the students, the Sanskrit teachers during their training are asked to make the students practice speaking in Sanskrit with one another and also with their teachers during their lunch/tiffin break. In the Sanskrit classes too, the teachers and students are encouraged to converse with one another in Sanskrit. However, the teachers concerned have informed that they are not able to apply that rule in practice so far.

Another teacher informed that since Sanskrit is an integral part of their school as their prayers are in Sanskrit and there is frequent use of *Shlokas*, when one joins this school, he or she must get acquainted with the language, even if partially. He mentioned that it is

a desirable factor if one has knowledge of *Shlokas* or is well-versed in Hindu/Sanskrit stories and texts.

5.4.3 Prayers conducted in the school

The prayer session of the school is held in the respective classrooms of the students, because the school is small which lacks sufficient space for common assembly. It is supervised by a dedicated teacher. The main prayer session takes place in a classroom where a large idol of Goddess *Saraswati* is placed in the centre, amply supported by three portraits of Goddess *Saraswati*, *Om mantra*, *Bharat Mata* on the wall as mentioned in previous sections. Images of Sankardeva and Goddess *Saraswati* are present in the walls of almost every classroom.

5.4.4 Students' usage of the language

In terms of applicability or usage of Sanskrit language by the students, the students do not practice it in the way they are expected to. During the lunch break or Sanskrit class for instance when the rule is there to talk in Sanskrit, the students rarely follow it. The prayers that the students are made to sing are also not comprehended by most of the students. The meanings of the prayers are written in Assamese in the diary for the junior classes. There are differences in the ways the students accommodate the influence of Sanskrit in their life. Though majority of them are not able to relate it with much, a few seemed to be much interested in it. This interest was also guided by the religious/spiritual and caste background. Ritaza, an Assamese speaking Brahmin female student, for instance, tends to memorise the *Shlokas* that are taught with the intention that later on she can use them in her conversations to prove a point. According to her citing *Shlokas* would help validate her arguments. While Bikash, a Bengali Brahmin boy, believes in the supremacy of the language as he can feel a sensation when he utters the word 'Om' and informed that he is proud to be able to learn such a great language. He added that at home he is supposed to chant the mantra a fixed number of times. It must be mentioned here that both the students belonged to the Brahmin community and the father of Ritaza was a member of RSS.

This status given to Sanskrit by the students is relatively very low. Some students struggle to comprehend its meanings and applicability in their school life and in outside. Mitu, an Assamese female student informed me that at home she sings the Assamese

version of the *Saraswati Vandana*. Most of the students mentioned that they find it very hard to memorise the prayers that are in Sanskrit and cannot remember the meaning of it even though they are made to sing these every day.

Regarding the Assamese prayers, majority of the students expressed that they understand the meaning of the prayers even though they do not reflect about it while singing.

5.5 Gender and disciplinary practice

The school tries to maintain discipline at every aspect of the lives of the students, at home and also at school. From segregations, dress code, to moral conduct the school tries to shape the students through its own ideals of discipline. The SSN/SSVs are also famous among the local population because of the good manners that they are known to instill in their students. This focus on discipline and *sanskars* of these schools is also mentioned by Sundar (2004) as the main reason behind its appeal to the non-RSS parents.

5.6 Enforcing segregation

There is strict maintenance of gender segregation among the students as well as teachers. The teachers' common room also maintains the gender divide rule. All the teachers have their respective seats and gender gap is maintained in the sitting arrangements. The teachers usually remain engrossed with their own work or close people. Here discussions among the opposite gender take place mostly for formal/work related issues.

For the students, this is maintained through practices of separate sitting arrangement of boys and girls and overseeing that students do not intermix during leisure. In the classrooms there are usually three rows of desks and benches divided for the students to sit, and girls and boys are made to sit separately based on their gender. The students were free to sit with whoever they want of their own gender. Since the school has very little space the students are supposed to sit inside their classrooms during leisure.

The school tries to maintain a very strict gender segregation pattern in order to restrict students from developing romantic relationships. To restrict this attraction and excess mixing-up of girls and boys within the school, the authorities apply different techniques in various spheres of the school life.

Students remain inside their classrooms even when teachers are not there. Though they do come out sometimes of their class or go near the toilet area. Since the common room and the principal's room face the open space that is there inside the school campus, students prefer to remain inside their classrooms than to hang out in that open space under the gaze of their teachers. They are not allowed to go out of the school campus till the school session ends.

Figure 11: Classroom scenario in the private school



In the classrooms, the students are made to sit in two different rows. Some days if a bench is broken or something else happens, the teacher might ask a boy or a girl to sit with one another too, if there is any vacant seat. The mixing of students on the basis of their gender in higher classes is restricted. There is restriction in terms of mobility of the students as well when they are in the open space especially for girls beyond the age of puberty.

Once a girl who was in Class VIII and was running on her way to her classroom was stopped and called by a female teacher aside. The teacher then told her that since she is growing up now, it does not seem proper if she runs much. She was also asked to not jump while walking. The teacher then told me,

She is maturing now and therefore it does not look proper when she jumps and hops around. Because of this I told her (*tai dangor hoi ahise nohoi, enekoi jopiyai ghuri furile bhal nedekhai. Xeikarone koi dilu aru*).

Though boys are asked not to run around much inside the school campus too, the reason applied to them is different. I was told that since the school space is limited and there are small children too, there are chances that they might get hurt. Also since there are people living just beside the school campus, too much noise would disturb them. Therefore, they request boys not to be too loud or run along much.

It must be said that in adopting different disciplinary approaches teachers tried to reform their students and guide them to the 'right' path along with the help of their parents instead of using punishments as a means directly or making a negative comment on the student. The school tried to develop morality of the students by making them realize their mistakes and improving them from within.

5.7 Dress code for school teachers

There is a prescribed dress code for teachers just like students. The male teachers are supposed to wear white *kurta*-pajama and the female teachers have to wear a blue blouse, white sador with a blue border and *muga* (yellowish-golden) coloured *mekhela*. The female teachers are asked not to apply makeup or wear heavy jewellery when in school. The male teachers are also supposed to put on a decent appearance by not sporting any fancy hairstyles or beards.

The teachers are supposed to maintain an image that would inspire the students. They are expected to guide the students in the right path. For this to happen, the teachers' appearance in front of the students' needs monitoring. Maintaining a decent image both inside and outside the school is expected from them as it is believed that even outside the school premise; one is a teacher in the eyes of the students. Therefore, they must behave and dress accordingly. During their training, the teachers receive guidance on how to present themselves so they can project the desired image in front of the students.

According to Lahiri and Bandhyopadhyay (2012), this imposition of a dress code on teachers has certain reasons. First and foremost, it is considered best to uphold society's current beliefs and values. Second, it is thought that students emulate their teachers' actions and perspectives. Therefore, teachers are expected to present themselves in a

morally appropriate manner. Thirdly, dressing in a socially acceptable manner is believed to lead to safety of women. These arguments were obvious at the schools under study, in the narratives of the teachers based on the ideology of the schools. However, the reasoning behind the dress differed.

5.8 Age, seniority and dress norms

The senior teachers and the recently recruited ones, regardless of their age, maintain the image as expected of a teacher from the school. In contrast to this, those teachers in between both the time frame, tends to be a little flexible when it comes to their maintenance of that simple appearance. The middle-ranking, female teachers are seen applying light makeup and sporting simple jewellery. This is not taken well by the senior teachers regardless of their gender, as well as by the principal of the school. During my stay in the school hours, many a times I have heard the principal commenting on such aspects in a subtle tone. Sometimes when he comes to the common room to share any information, if he happens to see something that catches his eyes, he would speak about it.

Similarly, Munmi, thirty-four years, General Science teacher, who was a senior teacher of the school in terms of her service period and was very simple in terms of appearance was not happy with the change in the appearance of a few teachers. She expressed her dissatisfaction as,

I feel we should come properly because before we tell the students to act properly, we are asked to maintain ourselves well. Earlier there was no lipstick on anyone's lips and the uniform was completely sky blue in colour, without any extra colour. Varieties were not allowed. That habit remained with me. Nowadays the new teachers indulge in style. When a teacher comes adorned with makeup, students' of the class focuses on the teacher instead of their lessons. Therefore such actions of the teachers must be looked at.

Another female teacher of forty-two years was of the view that having a common uniform brings about homogeneity among teachers, often diminishing the class background too. Moreover, she also feels that since students take a very keen interest in the appearance of their teachers, it is better to not give them any chance for scrutiny.

The rich one should also come in the same way, and the poor one should also come in the same way. Because of this uniform is needed. If we ourselves come wearing stylish clothes, how can we guide our students? The students observe everything very closely, what we wear and not wear. If we don't indulge in it, they also won't. But if we do, how will we stop them from doing so?

Nayana, twenty-eight years old, who has been working in the school since the last four years and likes to enhance her beauty by applying lipstick and kohl and has also straightened her hair, said that she cannot come to school without applying anything. She feels what she does is not too much but the school is too strict in some cases. Being grown-ups they should be given little freedom she feels. She said that whenever she wears something new to school or applies lipstick the principal or other senior members notice it and make comments. They keep a very close eye on everything.

Once in the common room there was a conversation going on between two senior most teachers of the school regarding dress of the teachers.

Junaki, female teacher, fifty-four: Have you seen how some of the new teachers come. We stayed so simple always.

Biswas, male teacher, forty-eight: Yes ma'am, what to say now! We are not able to keep the old environment. We cannot do anything but still the girls are good.

During special occasions in the school, the teachers both male and female were supposed to wear traditional dress but it need not be their uniform.

When it comes to clothes that the students are supposed to wear outside the school premises, the teachers try to educate their students and the parents as far as they can with their ideals of modesty. However, the teachers have expressed despair over the fact that even though they tell the students to dress modestly, many do not follow it as it depends on their parents.

5.8.1 Uniform of the students

Proper uniform and cleanliness plays an important role in maintaining discipline in this school. There is a prescribed set of uniform for girls as well as boys. The uniform of girl students from KG I (*Ankur*) to Class VII is pinafore and shirt. They are required to attach their school badge on the pinafore. The shirt is white for all class days and the pinafore is

blue for weekdays, while white pinafore is meant for Saturday. The skirt must cover their knees. For the students of class IX and X, the uniform is blue *kurta*, white *dupatta* and white *salwar*. For them the *kurta* must cover their knees. Girl students from all standards are required to tie their hair in two braids or two ponytails. Two braids are encouraged and sometimes those who tie ponytails are asked to braid it in the school hour. According to the teachers the girl students' hair style is based on scientific reasons. They believe the prescribed hairstyle stimulates blood circulation, which improves the concentration of the mind. The uniform of boys is light blue shirt and navy blue long pants. The boys are required to keep their hair short and not sport any fancy hairstyle.

The parents are provided with a written list of recommendations about their children's appearance when going to school or in everyday life right when they enroll their children. The suggested list is as follows:

For boys:

- I. They are required to wear uniform that is not tight and does not cling to the body. Their pants must not be tapered at the bottom and the shirt sleeves must be at least elbow length.
- II. They are not allowed to trim their hair at the side. They cannot keep it too long at the center or spike it.
- III. They cannot wear pants below their waist.

For girls:

- I. Their skirts must fall below knee level.
- II. Their *kurta* must be high necked and there should not be high slit at the sides.
- III. Their hair must be tied into two halves and cannot puff.
- IV. They cannot wear kohl, eyeliner, lipstick and lip-gloss. They must not keep long nails or apply nail polish.

In general

- I. The students are asked to wear decent clothes even when they are outside the school.
- II. If anyone is found guilty of defaming the school, he or she will be suspended from the school.

5.8.2 Measures taken to maintain discipline in terms of dress

Discipline regarding dress is taken very seriously and it is sought to be achieved through collective efforts of parents and teachers as can be witnessed from the directions circulated to the parents regarding their wards' appearance. A few teachers are appointed to look after maintenance of discipline in the school, from dress and appearance to bodily control. These teachers are mostly the ones who engage in inspection of uniforms but apart from them, the class teachers too look after the uniform and hair of the students in the classrooms. The students are not supposed to apply nail polish, or keep their nails long or apply any other beauty products on their face. During checking if anyone is found breaking the rule, they are asked to remove it once they reach home. Girls are also warned against keeping any loose hair in front. In case of boys it is the hair style that is checked the most. If someone's hair is long or is sporting a different hairstyle, the principal would take the student in his own scooter to a salon to cut it. For instance, teachers would check the length of the *kurtas*/skirts of the female students during the class hours and would ask those who fail to cater to the desired length to stitch a new set of uniform.

As mentioned above, girl students are also encouraged to tie braids in place of ponytails. Sometimes depending upon the teacher concerned, a student coming sporting two ponytails are asked to braid it in the school hour

This monitoring of discipline on regular basis is accentuated through organisation of *matri sanmilan* (meeting held for mothers of the students) where invited women speakers (mostly teachers from government schools) and concerned teachers (mostly those in charge of girls' education) speak to the mothers of the students and give them advice as to how to look after their children, especially in matters of their behaviour and appearance, both outside and inside the school premises. In terms of dress, mothers are asked to check that their children come to the school properly dressed, especially girl

students after attaining puberty. This is especially about girls who have large breasts. The mothers are directed to buy proper bra for their daughters as well as to look that they do not wear tight fitting clothes inside as well as outside the school premises. This supervision on dress and behaviour extends outside the space of the school as well and it operates for the students as well as the teachers. Often the students would be schooled for wearing clothes considered improper/indecent outside, as that is considered to bring a bad name to the reputation that the school holds of producing disciplined students guided by Indian morals.

5.8.3 Views of students on dress

A review of the *Balika Shikshan*, published by the Vidya Bharati board presents the role and position that girls of the Hindu nation must observe. In the booklet, restriction from market-driven forces and reduced uses of western products were highlighted and girls were supposed to adhere to that to safeguard the Hindu nation (Manjrekar, 2012). The school under study through its daily as well as special gendered disciplinary measures tries to create a kind of student abiding Hindu values, focusing on Indian traditions. In the school the idea that women are central to the discourse surrounding modern India as they present the distinctiveness of the modern nation by imbibing the behaviours and concerns of Indian women in contrast to western women (Wilton, 2012) is accepted.

Shenoy (2009) mentions that the women of the Hindutva movement though they commit to traditional Hindu values, they have altered and brought changes in their understanding of the idea of femininity within it. By not limiting themselves to a particular idea of femininity, certain sections of women enlarge their notion of femininity to present their contrasting beliefs. Nor can it be said that all girls subscribe to the dominant culture of the school.

Majority of the girls suggested that even though they are expected to wear traditional dress (*kurtas*) or dress modestly outside the school space too, they do wear jeans, crop tops and other dresses. But they make sure that it does not come to the notice of their strict teachers or the principal. The school tries to maintain the “disciplined/good” image of its students outside too and apart from behaviour, the clothes of the students is considered an integral part of this process. An incident that reflects this attempt by the school was when a female student named Pallabi, fourteen years, was once seen wearing a short dress outside in the market by the principal of the school. She was called to the

principal's room the next day and was scolded. Her parents were also called to discuss the matter.

Anushree, female, fourteen years, feels that by not allowing girls to wear what they want outside their home, the school is taking away their basic rights. She feels that though on the one hand the school acts in a very liberal manner by encouraging girls to get a good job similarly like boys so that they can be independent and are told to aim for higher education. Yet, on the other hand, when the school authorities check how they wear clothes outside the school, she feels bad and repressed. She said that she wears short dresses outside as her parents allow her. And if her parents allow her, then she does not feel bad wearing it. But she looks into it that her teachers do not find out about it.

Through this we can see contradictions of gender roles in the modern idea of nation-building where women are supposed to participate but within limited terms. The school on one hand asks its female students to achieve great heights in their academic as well as professional career, to work for the betterment of the nation, while at the same time by maintaining their image of the ideal women of India. As long as they remain within their boundaries in terms of dress or maintenance of femininity and feminine roles (caring and motherhood), they are considered to be on the right track.

A few conversations of students have been stated below.

Kaushik, a male student, fourteen years, explained it in detail and said,

The girls are asked not to wear lipstick, kohl when they come to school. Outside school, we are told that as we are the students of SSN the respect of our school should be maintained. Just by looking at our dress one must recognise that we are a student of SSN. However, it is sad that most of the boys and girls do not follow this! Some of them like to wear (indecent clothes) and I cannot say anything about it as it is their personal choice. But, personally I do not like wearing anything indecent, like torn jeans; I would not have worn such dress even if the school allowed me.

Debashish, a male student, responds by saying that,

I do not think that the girls' dress matters much, as it is girls who prepare *pithas*, etc. during *bihu* and all. Those activities are not influenced by whatever dress they wear because they are doing the work that they have to do.

After saying this he reflects for some time and again continues, ‘However it cannot be denied that clothes do influence our society at all. In Assam, it has left its influence.’ He laughs and looks at his male friends and says,

When they go to *naam ghars* (Vaishnava temple), they take a *gamusa*³ but are embarrassed to wear a *dhoti* (traditional loincloth worn by men). I must say that it is the boys’ own fault. We have started appropriating the culture of outsiders, but in America and other developed countries people are building new *mandirs* (temple), while we who are staying inside India are not able to preserve and follow our Indian culture.

However, it must be mentioned that whenever there is any religious function here in the school, Debashish comes wearing *dhoti* and also participates in the rituals. But, it is seen that majority of the boys are indeed embarrassed to wear a dhoti in any occasion and rarely a few can be seen to wear it.

Dress and the hair style of the students get much attention and are regulated through disciplinary mechanisms due to its influence on the co-relation between mind and body. This was so intricate to the schools’ ideology driven policy, that even when the girls came to school with wet hair, they are supposed to tie their hair tightly in two braids. Many females addressed these concerns and their discontent with it in their comments. Abhilasha, a student of Class VIII, thirteen years expressed her problems while coming to school during her menstruation as,

I do not mind braiding my hair in two sections during normal days, but during periods when we have to wash our hair on the third day, it was uncomfortable to braid my hair as it was wet. Once I went without making a braid but kept a ponytail as my hair was completely wet. I was then told to tie my hair into a braid. I spent the whole day in discomfort as I was forced to keep my wet hair braided.

It must be mentioned here that girls while being taught about cleanliness, are asked to wash their hair during their menstruation and this practice was said to be followed by all the girls in the present study.

³ Gamusa literally translates to a cloth to wipe one’s body, is omnipresent in Assam, with wide-ranging uses. It can be used at home as a towel and in public functions as a respectable/traditional symbol to felicitate people.

From this, it can be seen that Hindu traditions about cleanliness and pollution during the menstrual cycle were also covered by the school's code of conduct through the disciplinary mechanisms.

5.9. Conclusion

The examination of the principles, visual representations and disciplinary mechanisms adopted at the school reveals its aim to inculcate Hindu nationalism among the students. Even the teachers are expected to incorporate Hindu moral, cultural and traditional values in the school. Here we can see that a particular form of nation, i.e., a Hindu nation is implicitly represented and portrayed. There is also an attempt made at various levels to build a connection between the nation and the regional elements by invoking figures of national and regional importance and trying to blend them together as identical in nature-through language, ceremonies, and notable persons. Though there are tensions and conflicts while trying to bridge the national with the regional, the school seems to be successful in its aim of promoting Sanskrit high culture despite being an Assamese medium school. It is because within the larger society this school has been accepted as a vernacular school which is strongly rooted in the regional ethos of Assam.

The school administration, teachers, and the parents of the students are supposed to act as a collective whole to guide the students. Considering the issue of gender, the school seems to adhere to strict gender roles especially for women. The school considered as a home is supposed to have a population who would act like a family. The girl students are strictly monitored regarding their dress and hairstyles. They are expected to wear 'decent' cloth that does not expose their body viz. *churidar-kameez* and skirts that exceed knee length and tie their hairs in a braided manner. In the case of the female teachers, there is a double burden imposed on them, where they need to perform the role of a mother as well as a professional teacher. Thus, during the course of the study it was observed that even when women were expected to be independent economically and achieve higher ends in professional field, yet they are supposed to remain rooted to their 'natural' instinct and duty of being mothers. The ideal of middle class femininity is revered in this school.