

Schooling and Constructions of Citizenship: Some Reflections on Student Agency and Choice

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Rupamanjari Hegde¹ 

Abstract

A national system of education in modern nation-states is usually geared towards nation-building and schools play a significant role in grooming children as future citizens. While the dominant and powerful usually emerge as the ‘ideal citizen’ in the national imagination, the marginalized are constructed as the ‘other’, vilified, and stigmatised. The school, with its overt and hidden curriculum, operates as a major site for the reproduction of dominant ideology while at the same time creating opportunities for exercising human agency. This article, an ethnographic study, conducted in a government co-educational school in Delhi examines how it sought to mould the students into ‘ideal’ citizens and how this was received by them. Belonging to a relatively lower socio-economic background compared to the teaching community did they give their acquiescence? Or were they able to exercise their agency to challenge the entrenched power structures in society? Were their responses shaped by their specific social locations and the unfolding of

¹Azim Premji University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Corresponding author:

Rupamanjari Hegde, Azim Premji University, Burugunte Village, Survey No. 66,

Bikkanahalli Main Road, Sarjapura, Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: rupamanjari.hegde@apu.edu.in

‘cultural politics’? Moreover, when the nature of ‘official knowledge’ itself has undergone radical shifts and the idea of citizenship has been redefined with the introduction of the National Curriculum Framework 2005, were the students able to leverage the epistemological shifts embodied in the textbooks to reimagine and construct ideas of citizenship regarding marginalised communities? These are some questions that the present article seeks to address.

Keywords

Citizenship, Student Agency, Cultural Politics, Otherization

Citizenship, within a modern nation-state, is a legal status which entitles an individual to enjoy certain fundamental rights (e.g., right to life, right to freedom of speech and expression). However, a legal status is often inadequate to guarantee the full enjoyment of these rights. Rather a full actualisation of citizenship becomes possible only when an individual or a community can exercise all the rights that they are entitled to under the Constitutional framework and can also enjoy ‘a sense of identity and belonging’ (Jayal, 2013, 2) within the national imagination.

Citizenship from the perspective of the nation-state¹ is also a matter of duties. Rights provided to the citizens are often conditional to the extent they can fulfil their duties towards the nation-state. It, therefore, becomes imperative for the nation-state to educate citizens to contribute towards nation-building. It has been argued that for most countries in the world, a national system of education is conceptualised in a way that it contributes towards grooming young children into ‘future workers’ who can contribute towards national development and evolve into ‘future citizens’ (Green, 1997, 181). This necessitates the students—expected to be pillars in the project of nation-building—not only to be equipped with specific kinds of knowledge and skills but also to develop certain values and dispositions, in other words, a moral character. In fact, the school has been characterised as ‘the only moral agent through which the child is able to systematically learn to know and love his country’ (Durkheim, 1961, 79).

From a very different perspective, the institution has been regarded as a ‘dominant Ideological State Apparatus’ (Althusser, 1977) that promotes the reproduction and perpetuation of ‘dominant ideology’ and forms of knowledge that provides the ‘different classes and social groups with the knowledge and skills they needed to occupy their respective places in a labour force stratified by class, race and gender’ (Aronowitz & Giroux,

1986, 70). What becomes significant here is the role of the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Bowles & Gintis, 1976)—the daily rituals, codes of conduct, classroom organisation, and other informal pedagogical procedures (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1986; McLaren, 1986). These tacitly influence the students’ behaviour and attitudes and characterise classroom social relations. They thus ‘structure the unconsciousness of students’ (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1986, 76) and provide legitimacy to and rationale for the hierarchical organisation of knowledge, authority, work, values, and social relations.

The school as an independent institution also functions as a site for cultural reproduction by indirectly endorsing the culture of the dominant classes. This ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1973, 57–59)—the usage of language, dispositions, linguistic and cultural aptitudes, styles, tastes—that a middle/upper-class child inherits from her social location is often promoted by the school which devalues the culture of the less dominant groups.

Curricula and textbooks usually become potent tools to further the vision of nation-building and the construction/s of citizenship. It has been argued that since citizenship is central to the process of nation-building, the visualisation of the ‘ideal’ citizen in the national imagination and its construction through an officially sanctioned curriculum is usually aligned with the political agenda of the regime in power (Advani, 2009; Batra, 2015; Bhog et al., 2010). This largely explains why curricula and textbooks often become the repository of ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 2000, 44–46)—whereby certain kinds of knowledge are selected, especially those which serve the specific interests of or values upheld by the ‘powerful’ (Anyon, 1979, 362) sections of the society. What gets delegitimised or excluded in the process is the knowledge of the less powerful or those which challenge the interests of those in power.

Thus, the process of schooling with its overt and hidden curricula usually results in fractured constructions of citizenship. The imagination of the ‘ideal’ citizen tends to privilege those occupying the more dominant positions in the social hierarchy—male, upper caste, upper/middle class, belonging to majority communities and possessing the requisite ‘cultural capital’. A ‘good’ or ‘ideal’ citizen is also expected to possess certain socially desirable qualities—respect for rules, obedience to authority, patriotism, capability to contribute towards national development through sheer diligence among others (Thapan, 2006b, 4197)². On the other hand, the marginalised (usually the rural and urban poor, religious and ethnic minorities, Dalits, Adivasis, women and

LGBTQ groups) are imagined to be lacking in these characteristics. They are constantly reminded of their 'inadequacies', and are discriminated and vilified. They are thus constructed as the 'other' or lesser citizens (Jain, 2004, 181–182).

However, the argument that schools function only as sites for the reproduction of 'dominant ideology' has been challenged among others by Willis (1977) and McLaren (1986) who highlight the importance of human agency, focus on evidence of struggle and resistance and show how schools become sites where subordination and contestation occur simultaneously. Based on his ethnographic study of a Catholic middle school in Toronto largely attended by Azorean Portuguese migrants, McLaren (1986) demonstrates how the students in spite of being 'compliant and acquiesced to teacher-sponsored rules' put up 'a spectrum of resistances and reprisals to their instruction' which were intended to 'rupture and erode the authority of the teacher' and contest 'the legitimacy, power and significance of school culture' (McLaren, 1986, 146).

Several studies (Benei, 2008; Froerer, 2007; Sundar, 2004; Thapan, 2006a; Thapan ed., 2014) in the Indian context also explore the complex relationship between 'schooling, identity and citizenship' (Thapan ed., 2014, 15). Focusing on school culture and based on rich ethnographic details, they provide detailed insights into life within the school, where various actors- teachers, students, and others, engage in the process of meaning-making which often becomes a 'fraught and complex process' (Thapan ed., 2014, 5)³.

Textbooks and the transaction of the official school curriculum also become sites for the unfolding of 'cultural politics'. While the teachers regard the textbook as a vehicle of 'official knowledge' they often read and interpret it in 'multiple' and 'contradictory' ways- rejecting and transforming that body of knowledge selectively (Apple, 2000, 58). Moreover, there is no guarantee that 'what is taught is actually learned' (Apple, 2000, 58). This is because the experiences teachers and students bring with them based on their class, race, gender and religious background and the collective memory cherished by the community they belong to often influence the way they interpret textual knowledge. Thus, texts often become 'part of a complex story of cultural politics', there being multiple texts for every text—'contradictions within it, multiple readings of it, and different uses to which it will be put' (Apple, 2000, 59). 'Cultural politics', depending on the specific context can also create opportunities for displaying agency by students (Brown & Kelly, 2001; Porat, 2004).

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF 2005) has been critically acclaimed for having introduced radical ‘epistemological shifts’ (Batra, 2010, 13). Within this framework, citizenship education has been redefined by situating it within the perspectives of human rights and critical pedagogy aimed at providing the students with ‘an opportunity to reflect critically on issues in terms of their political, social, economic and moral aspects’ (NCF, 2005, 23). To focus on issues of equality, human dignity, and social justice the curriculum has also proposed the inclusion of the ‘perspectives of the Adivasi, Dalit and other disenfranchised populations’ in textbooks (NCERT, 2006, vii). Further, through the introduction of the Constructivist approach space has been created for the learners to actively participate in the construction of knowledge through democratic forms of interaction and sharing of multiple views. The social science textbooks which were operationalised in classrooms post-NCF 2005 are known to reflect these significant changes.

In a situation where schools act as ‘Ideological State apparatus(es)’ and seek to uphold a specific imagination of an ‘ideal citizen’ how do students respond? Do they exhibit acquiescence to reinforce dominant ideology or are they able to exercise agency? Are their responses shaped by their specific social locations and the unfolding of ‘cultural politics’? Moreover, when the nature of ‘official knowledge’ itself has undergone radical shifts and the idea of citizenship has been redefined, it becomes imperative to understand how such changes are received and interpreted by the students. Are they able to leverage the radical shifts embodied in the textbooks to reimagine and construct ideas of citizenship regarding marginalised communities? Based on empirical research, these are some questions that the present article seeks to address.

Jawahar Vidyalaya: Its Social Context and the Imagination of the ‘Ideal’ Citizen

The study for this article was conducted at Jawahar Vidyalaya (henceforth referred to as JV), a government co-educational school in South Delhi⁴. Part of a chain of government schools spread across India it caters to children of government employees, especially those on transferrable jobs. However, the children whose parents are employed in the private sector are also given admission. In the two sections selected for the study (Classes VIIIA and VIIIB), the children mostly belonged to low-income, Hindu families. While in most cases, the father was the sole bread earner working as a lower-division clerical staff in various government

institutions or as a lower-level salaried employee in the private sector as cooks, peons, lab assistants etc., the mother was a homemaker. The students were mostly from the general category though quite a few were from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Though there were no Muslim and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students in the selected classes there were a few in the school. Majority of the teaching faculty, mostly female and a few males, in contrast, belonged to upper caste Hindu families except a few who came from the reserved categories (mostly OBCs, SCs) and other religious minority groups.

There thus existed a marked difference between the teachers and students in terms of their socio-economic status. Moreover, the teachers were relatively affluent and well educated (having completed post-graduation and Bachelor of Education degrees) in comparison to the parents who had either completed a bachelor's degree or had merely finished high school. Some had only studied up to the middle school. Overall, the teachers not only possessed a certain 'cultural capital' but were better positioned in terms of their social status and power structure within the institution. This impacted the relationship between the teachers and students.

A 'good' student at JV was expected to be hard-working, studious, disciplined, obedient and one who possessed a moral character. The school according to the management and teachers was meant to inculcate certain values and groom the students to evolve into loyal and industrious human beings, in other words—'ideal' citizens capable of contributing towards national development. The teachers firmly believed that the students not only lacked these qualities, but their parents were incapable of appreciating the value of education and the potential it had to transform their children into 'better' human beings. This was evident in the condescending attitude with which they often spoke about the students and their parents. Ipshita Mitra (IM), the art teacher who supervised the maintenance of discipline in the school frequently complained about the absence of decorum amongst the students and their defiant attitude both inside and outside the classroom:

it's a general tendency whatever you ask them (students) not to do, they will definitely do that. ..then there's the issue of bad language and classroom behaviour ...They make it a point that you do not teach. They create a ruckus. They speak in a tone that you will be irritated. Or you will lose your interest to teach... they will not bring their notebooks throughout the week or resort to hooting in the class .. How far will you tolerate?

Though the teachers did not make any overt reference to the caste background of the students, they were judgemental about the socio-economic status and educational background of the parents. They often attributed the lack of discipline among the students to ‘bad parenting’. The parents, they felt, were least concerned about the absence of discipline among their children and their disinterest in studies. Instead, they often blamed the school and teachers for being strict. According to IM, ‘good parenting’ for such ‘not highly educated parents’ meant giving indulgence to the children by ‘investing a lot of money’ and allowing them to carry a lot of cash to school.

Very often the teachers would also question the moral character of the parents. Once while complaining about a student in his class, Rajesh Mishra, a senior teacher, raised an allegation about the character of his parent:

This boy’s father is a cook in a university mess...and they have paneer almost daily for lunch and dinner.....now you or I cannot afford it....that is because he lifts a lot of food from the hostel mess.....so what do you expect from the boy?!!

The teachers further looked upon themselves as ‘selfless gurus’ whose incumbent duty was to give their best while teaching through sheer hard work. This impacted the pedagogic approach in the classrooms. Nina Dobhal (ND), a Social Studies teacher in the middle school shared that the teachers would routinely help the students complete the summer holiday assignments in school itself which otherwise were meant to be done at home. This was because they were apprehensive about entrusting the parents to provide any support to their children. ND shared in a condescending voice: ‘These are children of cooks, peons, domestic helps...how will they help their children with homework?!!’ However, the teachers felt demotivated by the lack of interest in studies among most students. Keshav Mishra (KM), one of the Social Studies teachers whose class was observed, argued: ‘...I am not concerned as to who’s doing what.... I just do what I have to do.....have been in this profession for the last 24-25 years!! ..There are a few children who are sincere.... they will hopefully benefit’.

The students at JV thus did not qualify as ‘ideal’ citizens according to the teachers. Believing it to be their duty to reform them, the teachers adopted certain strategies, especially through the disciplinary regime and classroom teaching-learning processes.

Navigating the Disciplinary Regime

The school as an institution is characterised by a certain culture—school culture—which comprises the disciplinary regime, norms, regulations, and rituals. This is manifested in the bodies of the students. It has been argued that the body of the pupil in the context of the school environment not only functions as a medium for ‘acquiring knowledge’ but also becomes ‘a symbol representing ...the culture of the school’ (Bánovčanová & Masaryková, 2014, 252). And for this, the students are expected to cultivate docility and obedience because a ‘docile body’ can be ‘subjected, used, transformed and improved’ (Foucault, 1991, 136). A disciplinary regime⁵ is required for this.

One of the many adages painted on the walls of JV read ‘Discipline is the key to all greatness - spiritual and moral’. This was strongly believed by the management and teachers who made a concerted effort to inculcate certain socially desirable comportments among the students. The school diary given to each student at the beginning of the academic year instructed them to attend school regularly in ‘neat, clean and tidy’ school uniform and be punctual. This was repeatedly emphasised by the school management and teachers during the morning assembly. The principal, Mr. Srivastava often drew the attention of the assembled students to the correlation between discipline and academic success:

All of you read the same books and are taught by the same teachers. Yet there is vast difference in your performances in the examinations.... If you are punctual in everything you do, maintain discipline, and wear your uniform properly you will be able to reach school before time. Your performance will also be better.

The school expected the students to come neatly groomed. All boys were expected to have short hair, tidily combed while it was mandatory for senior boys to be clean-shaven. The girls were instructed to wear their hair either in two neatly tied plaits or a ponytail along with red ribbons/rubber bands. Wearing any make-up or flashy jewellery like bangles, earrings, or nose pins was also discouraged. On one occasion ND, the Social Studies teacher shared:

There’s one girl in my class 6... very dark-*kaali hai*- but has beautiful eyes. Once when I found that all her hair was on her face I told her: “Look you have such lovely eyes...if your hair is all over your face how will one

see your eyes? In school we like students to tie their hair neatly in two plaits...then only they look adorable....they look like real school girls!

The school also adopted specific measures to discipline the minds of students through regulating their thoughts. Some were subtle like displaying adages (Hindi and English) inside the school building. This included advisory statements that enumerated the guidelines that the students were expected to follow within the school premises and were aimed at evoking within them a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the institution. Others were philosophical in nature (e.g., 'Knowledge of our duties is the most essential part of the philosophy of life').

Research (Lanas & Brunila, 2019; Laws & Davies, 2000) shows that there exists a certain power structure within a school with the teachers having more authority than the students. Any demonstration or initiative by the students that can disturb this power relationship is likely to be categorised as disturbing or 'bad' behaviour. In fact, it has been argued that to be recognised as legitimate and 'good' students, they 'need to avoid disturbing the power relations within the school by actively displaying their subjection and submission' to authority (Laws & Davies, 2000, 214). This implies inculcating among the students certain fixed ideas about what is correct and what is not. Sometimes the daily morning assembly at JV was used as a forum for this. While certain behaviours by the students invited praise from the teachers, some others were criticised and the perpetrators if identified were reprimanded. Once IM appealed to the moral conscience of the assembled students and displayed a broken soap dispenser which she claimed was pulled out from one of the lavatories by some miscreant.

The school has put in a lot of effort and money to provide a clean and hygienic environment for you. We have provided liquid soap dispensers along with hand towels in every toilet. But there has been no cooperation from your side.

To ensure that everything was in order the school authorities adopted certain proactive measures like installing a closed-circuit camera in the principal's room. Ostensibly its purpose was to maintain a close watch over all the areas of the school premises for security reasons. However, it was like a 'Panopticon' that provided a constant reminder to all staff and students that their activities were being closely monitored by the principal⁶. Additionally, every morning the principal took a few rounds of the entire school to ensure that the teachers went to the classes on time

and the students remained inside the classroom in the absence of the teacher. Often when the students became boisterous inside the classroom, the teacher, to make them quiet, issued warnings: ‘Principal Sir is on his round. So better behave yourself!’ It was a common sight in the school to see the vice-principal and teachers keeping a watch when the students walked past the corridor while moving from one class to another or when the day ended. This was to ensure that they walked in a single file without resorting to any mischief.

Further, corporal punishment⁷ was frequently used to reign in ‘undisciplined’ students. The vice-principal, the sports teachers and even the principal were often seen moving in the corridor with a long stick in their hands. If they caught any of the students ‘misbehaving’ they immediately resorted to yelling and beating them up. Even the presence of an outsider (the researcher) did not act as a deterrent. However, usually, it was the boys who were subjected to corporal punishments. Girls, when caught ‘misbehaving’ were verbally rebuked and let off with a warning. Observations of Social Studies classes revealed that corporal punishment was used inside the classroom also. In fact, many of the teachers justified its use saying that sometimes they had no choice but to use corporal punishment to make the students behave properly. But they complained how their well-intentioned efforts were often misconstrued by the students and parents. KM commented:

These students are never interested in studying. These days there’s no enjoyment in teaching-*maza nehi aata hai!* In desperation sometimes I have to scold them...even spank them once or twice...And then parents lodge complaints against the teachers....!

The students responded to the disciplinary measures in diverse ways ranging from acceptance to questioning to defiance. Some students agreed that the school uniform helped in maintaining a sense of ‘equality’ amongst the student community. But many were often found to defy the rules. Many of the senior girls and a few in the upper primary classes were seen to flaunt their front or side fringes and often had their hair fashionably done in a single ponytail. Using kohl in their eyes, wearing nose-rings, applying nail polish with the trendiest shades were popular among them. Similarly, quite a few boys grew a beard while some, following the latest trends, sported a spiked hairdo. The classrooms and the corridor would usually be noisy whenever there was a short break between two periods and there would be no teacher inside and the students, mostly boys, would be seen running around in the corridor playfully.

Although the teachers always blamed the students for being undisciplined, the latter had their own perception of what constituted 'appropriate' behaviour and what did not. Irrespective of the differences in their socio-economic background (across gender, caste, religion) they were able to exhibit their discernment when asked to comment. Many amongst those interviewed resonated with the concerns highlighted by the teachers and endorsed the need for discipline. Aparna (a Hindu and from a general category) shared: 'The boys... create a ruckus when the teacher is not around....running and shouting in the corridor, beating up each other!...When teachers question them they even answer back!!' However, the students were sceptical about the efficacy of some of the disciplinary measures and suggested alternate and in their opinion 'better' strategies. Himanish (an OBC student) argued:

The teachers need to change the disciplinary measures....for instance they often give time-outs to students for four periods. But for them it becomes equivalent to bunking a class and makes them more excited. Instead, the teachers should detain the students after school or call the parents.!!

While the students did not question the right of the teachers to punish them, they openly voiced their displeasure regarding the arbitrary use of corporal punishment. Anuj (general category) quipped:

The Government has banned corporal punishment. But even then, many teachers in our school resort to it...that is absolutely wrong. If we want, we can file cases against these teachers...!! They should instead make us understandexplain things like parents do!

In the two classes that were observed, the students could be broadly divided into certain categories. Those who were studious, quiet, diligent, and always ready to follow whatever the teachers instructed were regarded as obedient and 'good' students. There were also a few who despite being mischievous occasionally, were confident, articulate and hence considered 'intelligent' by the teachers and liked by them. A third category consisted of the ones who were neither articulate nor confident and did not usually perform well. They never really caught the teacher's attention. A few of the girls and boys, mostly Dalits, belonged to this group. The fourth category consisted of the most mischievous ones, who were usually inattentive in class and being 'disruptive' (according to the teachers) drew their ire frequently. Quite a few from this group expressed their concerns about the prejudices harboured by the teachers against

them. In their opinion even when they tried to be attentive or ask questions to clarify their doubts their questions were either ignored by the teachers or not appreciated⁸. Anuj shared: ‘Actually the teacher had already placed us in a certain category...so whenever we would ask any question she would ignore us...make us stand outside the classroom!!’. His views were echoed by Punit, (an OBC):

The child had already fallen in the eyes of the teacher...so when he would ask any question the teacher would think that he would say bad things- *gande baat*- or ask something useless.

The students were also critical of many of the teachers. They were aware of the difference in socio-economic status between them and their teachers. What they disapproved of most was how some of the teachers while admonishing them, often insulted, and humiliated them and their parents based on this difference. Anita (an OBC) narrated:

Once one of the students, Abhijeet was caught by one teacher for being naughty. So, he asked Abhijeet: What does your father do? When he answered that he is a chef this teacher retorted – ‘A chef’s son cannot be any better...go and study in the school in which your parents studied! Your parents haven’t taught you how to behave!!’

Some even shared how the teachers frequently resorted to verbal abuse, sometimes even with sexual innuendos. They found such behaviour on the part of the teachers unacceptable and highly condemnable and hence questioned their moral authority to discipline the students. Two girls, both from the general category commented:

Trisha: One teacher uses abusive words which I feel ashamed to repeat before you...he abuses our parents ...even gives *gaali* to girls...some teachers even use *ma-behen ki gaali!!*

Aparna: The teachers need to behave themselves and become disciplined!!

Despite the teachers and school management being dismissive of them as ‘disinterested’, and ‘undisciplined’, the students at JV exhibited maturity and were able to distinguish between what according to the school constituted appropriate behaviour and what did not. They were aware of the norms in the school and knew what was expected of them as students. In fact, they admitted to being guilty when they deviated from

those expected norms and never questioned the authority of the teachers to reprimand or punish them. Thus, they did not completely disagree with the school's idea of how a 'good' student needed to behave or who could be regarded as an 'ideal' citizen. Hence, they contributed to the perpetuation and reproduction of 'dominant' culture and practices to an extent.

However, operating within that framework, the students exhibited their agency when, irrespective of the differences in terms of their gender and caste they strongly disapproved of the use of corporal punishment. Being cognisant about their rights they questioned its rampant use since it was a punishable offence. At the same time, they were endowed with a strong sense of self-respect and dignity. They were respectful towards the teachers but vehemently objected to the abusive language used by some of them and the condescending attitude and disrespect that the teachers displayed towards their parents. Here also they displayed their agency.

Routine Rituals and the Everyday-ness of 'Othering'

Several studies (Benei, 2008; Farooqui, 2012; Thapan ed., 2014) in India, based on rich ethnographic data have revealed how the ethos and values of schools, whether government or non-RSS private institutions, tend to privilege the majoritarian (Hindu) culture through routine rituals like daily assemblies, celebration of special events and the symbols and displays. JV was no exception.

One of the aims of JV, as stated in the mission document available on the school's official website was the promotion of national integration. It was expected that this would be reflected in the cultural ethos of the school through an appreciation of India's pluralistic traditions and a deep commitment to secularism. Yet the school's internal dynamics provided space for many celebrations, rituals, and symbolisms all of which moulded the institution's ethos towards a majoritarian, Hindu/Hinduised. The school lobby, a space close to the principal's office and used as a waiting area for all visitors was decorated with idols of Saraswati and Ganesha, both Hindu deities, of learning and wisdom respectively. The idols were worshipped periodically following traditional Hindu rituals of floral offerings and the use of incense sticks. However, neither the teachers nor most of the students (Hindus) found this contradictory to the values professed by the institution. KM commented:

I don't know of any other religion which has a specific god/goddess for learning...so there is nothing wrong in keeping a statue of Saraswati...this

is an educational institution and all students can seek blessings from her.....

KM's views were endorsed by students like Ishani (a Hindu from a non-reserved category):

There is no harm in keeping a statue of goddess Saraswati because it is believed that she brings good wishes for all students whether she is a Hindu or belongs to any other religion.

The daily morning assembly at JV often included the collective singing of school prayer, either the popular Sanskrit sloka '*Asotoma Sadgamaya*' (a popular Upanishadic hymn) or *Gayatri mantra* (a popular Vedic hymn). The Independence Day celebrations, ostensibly a secular affair as reflected in the inclusion of songs and dances from diverse cultural genres, began with a patriotic song in Hindi invoking the motherland as '*Jaya Jaya Devi Bharatamata*' (Ode to thee Goddess Mother India)⁹. Thus, all the songs and prayers had a distinct Hindu religious overtone. But most of the time, the teachers and students remained in denial. Manjula Sachdeva, the co-curricular activities coordinator, vociferously emphasised the school's non-partisan, secular character:

We at JV treat all students equally, we make no difference in terms of their caste or religion. We are all Indians!

However, the exclusion of content from other religions like Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism rendered such claims to be suspect and confirmed the non-secular character of the selection.

Irrespective of the differences in caste background the students (all Hindus) justified the majoritarian ethos of the school. While a few mentioned about the 'sarv dharma prayer' (prayer of all religious faiths) held during specific occasions like the 'Thinking Day' some attributed the marked absence of prayers from religions other than Hinduism to the presence of a comparatively lesser number of students belonging to minority religious communities in the school.

Sunil (a Dalit from a well-to-do family): If the total number of students in this school is around five thousand, then the children from Sikhism, Christianity and Islam together would constitute only three hundred students. If one must organise separate assemblies or events to celebrate their religious festivals just imagine how much time it will require!

Trisha (a Hindu from a general category): Actually, they have their separate schools and their festivals are celebrated there. This also explains why they are present in such small numbers here.

The Friday morning assembly was special in nature and was used as a forum to highlight the significance of the national holidays among other things. I observed that prior to Diwali—a major Hindu festival—one student lucidly read out an elaborate write-up explaining the importance of each of the five days of Diwali. A short speech by the principal followed reiterating the need to adhere to safety measures while bursting crackers. A similar fanfare was not observed during Muharram¹⁰. Though two senior girls (both Hindus) read out a write-up explaining the significance of the day, the content appeared disorganised, incoherent, and filled with innumerable grammatical errors. Though they shared that they had sourced the information from an internet website, they were unable to explain it and when asked, one of them nonchalantly replied: ‘I am not a Muslim...how will I know the meaning of all this!’

Based on ethnographic studies, Farooqui (2012, 9) observes how some ‘rituals, symbols and practices gain legitimacy and “official” status by becoming a part of the school calendar and environment, while some others are, consciously or otherwise, denied that space.’ This she notes offers ‘covert and hidden messages of acceptance of some groups and non-acceptance of others’. This was evident at JV where all the displays, rituals, and celebrations, having a distinct Hindu symbolism directly and indirectly projected the Hindu way of life as synonymous with the Indian culture. In such a situation, a Hindu emerged as the prototype of the normative Indian thereby excluding all other identities. This was easily accepted by most of the students who also belonged to the majority community. In fact, this identity shaped their idea as to who constituted the ‘ideal’ citizen and who needed to be excluded and marked out as the ‘other’—in this case their Muslim counterparts.

Conversations with some of the Hindu students on several occasions did reveal a distinct sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ attitude among them¹¹. Although many of the students resided in localities where there were a few Muslim families, they shared that they rarely interacted with their Muslim neighbours whom they saw from a distance or heard about from other Hindu neighbours. The academic and non-academic staff in the school, barring a few, were also Hindus. Among the students, although there were quite a few who belonged to different minority communities (Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism) they were outnumbered by the Hindus who constituted the majority. Under such circumstances, it was

quite possible that they echoed the popular perceptions prevalent within the majority community. Drawing largely from their exposure to electronic and print media as well as their lived experiences they formed certain ideas about their Muslim counterparts which reflected the stereotypes and prejudices harboured by the majority community. Anusha, a Dalit Buddhist from a well-to-do family shared her experience of having seen ‘Muslim schools’ during her family visit to Jammu and Kashmir:

During my family trip to Jammu and Kashmir, I had seen some Muslim schools... they are taught about Muslim religion...their prayer is different...not like our prayer, astoma sadgamayo...their uniform is also different...the boys wear long kurta, pyajama and cap- topi. The girls wear a white scarf around their head and kurta pyajama.

The students further referred to the media reportage on various current and past political developments, for instance, the numerous violent communal riots that have occurred in the recent past and issues like ‘love-jehad’ which made them aware of the tenuous relationship between the two communities. It reinforced the image of the Muslims as violent, fanatic and having links with terrorist outfits¹².

Smriti (a Hindu from non-reserved category): ...there was a report in the television about a shooter named Tara who married a person... only after marriage, she got to know that he was a Muslim! He kept forcing her to convert to Islam ...broke her backbone...got her bitten by dogs... Actually he was connected to some terrorist organisation...!!

The same students who, irrespective of their caste background, vociferously spoke in unison against the condescending attitude of the teachers towards their parents and the derogatory remarks made by them came together once again and spoke in the voice of the majority community. The hidden curriculum of JV—as exemplified through the displays, daily rituals, celebrations, and special events—left its imprint on the ‘unconsciousness’ of the students (all Hindus) and influenced the social relations between them and their Muslim counterparts. These students also drew upon their lived experience and prevalent popular discourse. Although they exercised choice and agency to an extent, they failed to overcome their prejudices and instead reinforced the stereotyping and vilification of the minority community resulting in the latter’s otherisation. Based on the apparent differences between the two communities magnified by the popular discourse and their sense of perceived threat (as Hindus)

from Muslims, they contributed towards the legitimisation and perpetuation of the dominant majoritarian culture and ideology.

Cultural Politics and the Construction of the ‘Other’

The foregoing discussion highlights the camaraderie among the student peer group at JV irrespective of their differences in terms of gender, and caste identities. The prevalent student culture and their social location (all of them belonged to a lower socio-economic background compared to the teachers and were Hindus excepting one or two who were from religious minority communities—Sikhs and Buddhists) held them as a collective. However, there were situations when such solidarity was ruptured.

As already mentioned, the NCF 2005 has proposed the inclusion of the perspectives of marginalised communities (namely Dalits, adivasis and minorities) in the curriculum to address the issues of equality and social justice¹³. The Class VIII Social and Political Life textbook¹⁴ (published by NCERT) for instance includes two chapters—Understanding Marginalization and Confronting Marginalisation. The second chapter specifically explains how historically the Dalits¹⁵ have been subjected to societal discrimination and how such discriminatory practices have prevented the community from accessing basic resources resulting in their marginalisation. Mention is also made of the struggle and resistance put up by ordinary members of the community to reclaim their rightful status as citizens (for instance, the Safai Karamchari Andolan¹⁶ and the struggles put up by many assertive Dalit groups in South India). Further attention is drawn to the various laws that have been enacted by the Parliament of India towards the realisation of social justice for marginalized communities as well as the specific schemes and policies (e.g., reservation policy¹⁷) that have been introduced to safeguard their interests. Supported by an innovative pedagogical approach as seen in the inclusion of narratives, visuals, and statistical data along with different levels of in-text questions, the textbooks thus provide ample opportunities for the teachers to engage the students in a meaningful dialogue and encourage them to think critically regarding various issues related to inequality and social justice.

Classroom observations at JV however revealed that the teachers routinely digressed from the textbook, either overlooking relevant ideas and concepts or distorting them. The various innovative and creative expressions like storyboards along with visuals and in-text questions

were also left out. The textbook was thus transacted selectively. The pedagogic approach followed by the teachers being based on rigid 'framing' (Bernstein, 1971)¹⁸, the students' participation in the classroom was rarely of their own volition. Since it merely required them to reproduce factual details, they did not critically engage with the textbook. They remained disengaged most of the time choosing to be attentive only when they needed to copy dictated answers or mark out specific sentences in the textbook at the behest of the teachers. While both the teachers and the students introduced out-of-school knowledge, the students' contributions were rarely accepted as valid. Rather it was the teachers' contributions which acquired the status of legitimate knowledge although on many occasions the relevance of such knowledge remained questionable. In rare instances however such boundaries were successfully transgressed by a small section of very articulate students belonging to the general category. This was observed in the class of Madhumita Roy (MR), the Social Studies teacher in Class VIII B while she taught the chapter 'Confronting Marginalisation':

MR: Those people whom you have treated differently for them the government has introduced a special provision...if Adivasi/Dalit boys and girls want to study, hostels have been opened for them for free. Why free? Because they don't have money.

Smriti: This is wrong! The SC/STs, Adivasis appear for many exams... there are many among the general category who are poor. Why shouldn't they get these benefits?

MR:...there is reservation of seats in education and in central and state government jobs. If one person gets a job, it will lead to the upliftment of the family. If some Adivasi child is doing well in studies, he/she must compete with children from the same category to become a doctor or engineer. If there are 100 seats, 80 will go to the general category and remaining 20 will be reserved for the SC/STs. ...There is also the cut-off point. For instance, if the cut-off point is 99 % for the general category, then it will be little less, say 96 % for the reserved category. Is this fine?

Smriti: No, not fair!

MR: There must be a debate. Without this facility such a child will not be able to become a doctor. If we give them the opportunity, then he will at least become a doctor though not a very good one...!

In this episode, MR, drawing from the textbook, was referring to the group-differentiated rights provisioned by the Indian Constitution like the reservation policy and other steps taken by the Indian State to address the marginalisation experienced by the Dalits and Adivasis. This evoked sharp responses from a few students—Hindus belonging to the general category. One student, Smriti argued that it was an unfair policy the benefits being limited to the SCs and STs. She argued that the benefits should be extended to the economically weaker sections among the general category also. MR (also a Hindu from a non-reserved category) approved of the reservation policy. However, she questioned the rationale behind introducing different cut-off levels for different categories of students and expressed apprehension about the capability of students from the reserved category to graduate as medical professionals.

Similar concerns were voiced by the same students during one of the focus group interviews. Drawing upon their individual lived experiences and influenced by popular discourses in mainstream media like newspapers and television, they echoed the anxiety and grievances shared by their family members about their prospects related to higher education and careers. They confidently alleged that the reservation policy was often misused by people from the 'lower castes' many of whom were affluent and hence undeserving. They argued that the benefits of the policy should be extended to economically weaker sections of the society while those from SC/ST families and well-placed, should be made to opt for open competition. Amitosh, from the general category, quipped: 'Those SC/STs who get jobs through reservation...their caste certificates should be cancelled once they get their jobs...otherwise they would be taking undue advantage'. Pointing to one of his classmates, Sunil (an SC from a well-to-do family), Amitosh further argued: 'Sunil is a SC and has access to all kinds of facilities. If someone like him gets the benefit of reservation, won't it be too easy for him?' The students also questioned the validity of the difference in cut-off points set up for entrance examinations in various institutions of higher education. Arjun argued: '...the SC/STs will pass even if they score 60% while those from the general category will have to score 80% and above.....this is unfair!! I keep reading about these issues in the newspaper'.

These views were countered by a small section of SC students (namely Sunil and Priya). They argued in favour of the reservation policy to address the discrimination experienced by the Dalits over generations. However, being less in number they were overpowered by their more articulate peer group.

The textbook was clearly not the only factor which shaped the way these students participated in the meaning-making process. Rather it was open to diverse influences—the specificities of the socio-cultural milieu within which they were located, the dominant discourses prevalent within that milieu as also the memories of their personal lived experiences. All these coalesced to form a ‘cultural schemata’ (Porat, 2004, 965) and provided them with a lens through which they read, transacted and interpreted the textbook. Being part of this socio-cultural context, they easily imbibed the prejudices, stereotypes, and perceptions regarding the Dalit community prevalent within that milieu. Hence, they vociferously argued in favour of a system based on what they considered was ‘merit’, failed to appreciate the need for equity and social justice and hence contested the textual knowledge. This explains why the classroom became a site for the playing out of ‘cultural politics’ (Apple, 2000, 59).

The discussions around the reservation policy exposed the differences that existed among the students regarding who had the ‘legitimate’ claim to citizenship and who could be excluded. Situated in a more advantageous position in the caste hierarchy the students had no hesitation in categorising their peers from less privileged backgrounds as the ‘other’. The teacher, being from an unreserved category, also appeared to be influenced by similar assumptions and stereotypes. She was unable to convincingly explain the rationale behind the reservation policy to the students and contributed to the process of ‘otherisation’. Although the students exercised their choice and agency, they failed to counter the dominant ideology and instead helped perpetuate it.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion tries to provide an insight into the complexities and the nuanced ‘cultural politics’ within a school and how students navigated their journey and everyday experience to engage in a process of meaning-making to articulate their constructions of citizenship.

The school authority with its disciplinary regime sought to mould the students into a moral community with its focus on developing a desirable body image and regulating their mind. It was their way of shaping students into ‘ideal’ citizens for future. The students, irrespective of their diverse social locations used various strategies to steer their way-complying, negotiating, and often challenging the institutional authority to their advantage. The teachers held the absence of proper parenting responsible for the disciplinary issues in the school, thereby revealing a

prejudiced and condescending attitude towards the students and their parents based on their privileged social location. The students acknowledged the need for disciplinary measures to improve the bad *mahaul* (environment) within the institution. However, they expressed their strong disapproval regarding the arbitrary use of corporal punishment, abusive language used by some teachers and the disrespect exhibited by teachers towards their parents. Thus, they exhibited agency to challenge the power structure within the school.

The students (all Hindus) once again submerged their caste differences and joined hands in solidarity to endorse the cultural ethos of the school. However, they failed to question its majoritarian character which exposed its 'hidden curriculum'. In fact, they had no hesitation in speaking in the voice of the more powerful majority community to project themselves as the prototype of the 'ideal' Indian citizen while pushing their counterparts from the minority community to the fringes thereby otherising them.

The apparent solidarity among the students however appeared fractured when it involved staking claim to certain rights. In questioning the legitimacy of the reservation policy and accusing their SC/ST counterparts situated in a disadvantageous position in the caste hierarchy of unduly appropriating certain benefits these students (Hindus, from non-reserved categories) revealed their inability to think critically. Thus, they failed to leverage the radical possibilities embedded in the textbooks and instead fell prey to entrenched stereotypes within their social milieu magnified through toxic public discourses.

The students at JV, especially those from the majority community and occupying a privileged position in the caste hierarchy exercised their choice to construct their imagination of the 'ideal' citizen which varied according to the context. They did exhibit agency but only to further their limited self-interest. By failing to challenge the existing social structures and majoritarian cultural beliefs, they not only strengthened them but were unable to evolve into deliberative and transformative citizens.

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Notes

1. Historically, the emergence of the nation states in the nineteenth century necessitated the creation of a modern citizenry imbued with national consciousness so crucial in the process of nation-building. This required the ‘welding of diverse, conflicted, and multiple regional populations’ to transform them into national citizens infused with loyalty towards the nation state (Saigol, 2000, 135). Earlier, education in most of the major West European countries and northern states of USA was under the control of religious institutions like the Church which primarily imparted ‘apprentice-based forms of education’ (Green, 1997, 32). But the changing socio-political scenario created the demand for a very different kind of education geared towards producing and reproducing citizens/workers. A state directed mass schooling system was regarded as most suitable to perform this function by bringing about a transformation ‘in consciousness, feeling and imagining’ among the people (Saigol, 2000, 135).
2. According to Thapan (2006b, 4197) the ‘idea of the “good” citizen ...in schools in contemporary India serves to dwell on and reproduce ideas about the “practice” of good citizenship through developing certain socially desirable behavioural traits and practices. This is done through developing a respect for authority,... law, socially constituted and legitimised norms for good behaviour that are rewarded and reproduced, and through rituals ... in school, a reiteration of national ideals, a celebration of collective life and the value of an ideal community’.
3. Pointing out that a school is a ‘paradoxical site’, Deka (in Thapan ed, 2014, 100) shows how the institution’s attempt to promulgate ‘Indianness through cultural functions and resisting western influence’ was received with ‘hybrid understandings of being Indian’ by the student community leading to a ‘everyday, subjective understandings of citizenship’.
4. The name of the school as also the names of the teachers and students have been changed here for the purpose of maintaining the confidentiality of the participants involved in the research. The data for the study was collected through classroom observations, focus group interviews with a selected group of students and one-to-one interactions with a few teachers and school management. Two sections were selected, Class VIII A and Class VIII B, where the Social Studies classes taught by KM and MR, respectively, were observed. For the focus group interactions about 30 students, 15 from each section, were chosen to ensure proportional representation from all social groups based on gender, caste, and religion.
5. Foucault (1991, 138) argues that discipline ‘increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)... it dissociates power from the body; on one hand it turns it into an “aptitude”, a “capacity”, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection’.

6. According to Foucault (1991, 201–203) the Panopticon is ‘an important mechanism, for it automatizes and deindividualizes power’ and he ‘who is subjected to a field of visibility, and ..knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power.. makes them play spontaneously upon himself... inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection’.
7. According to Section 17 of the Right to Education Act, 2009, corporal punishment has been completely banned in educational institutions in India and anyone indulging in such behaviour can be subjected to disciplinary action.
8. Lanas and Brunila (2019, 3) argue that ‘interpretations of behaviour in school correlate with student skin tone, class, and gender’ and while ‘the norm of a well-behaved student’ often results from ‘a particular cultural construction of student hood’ which for many may be too difficult to achieve, very often students are forced to ‘continuously work out how to become credible subjects’ not only in the ‘eyes of their teachers’ but also within their peer group.
9. The figure of *Bharatmata* or Mother India is a symbolic representation of the Indian nation. Its origin is traceable to the late nineteenth century Indian National Movement when it was used by the nationalist leaders as a rallying symbol to evoke nationalist sentiments among fellow Indians. She is depicted as a Hindu goddess wearing a saffron coloured sari, golden jewellery, holding the Indian national flag and is often accompanied by a lion.
10. Muharrum is the first month of the Islamic calendar and is regarded as one of the four sacred months when warfare is banned. The 10th day of Muharrum, known as Ashura, is commemorated by Shia Muslims as a day of mourning. On this day in 680 CE Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammed and his relatives were killed in the Battle of Karbala.
11. According to Oommen (2014, 119–120) one stigma attached to the Muslims is that they are ‘cultural outsiders’, theirs being an ‘alien religion which entered India through conquest’ and they continue to be blamed for the Partition of the Indian sub-continent and the bloody communal riots which followed. Their allegiance towards the country is often held suspect as it is believed that their loyalty lies elsewhere - Pakistan and Bangladesh. These misconceptions are accentuated by the community’s preference for an exclusive personal law anchored in religious texts, refusal to accept a Uniform Civil Law and adherence to a distinct lifestyle. These factors reinforce their identity as the ultimate ‘Other’ in the eyes of the Hindus. Thapan argues that although this ‘Hindu obsession with the Muslim “other” had been prevalent for many decades it ‘has taken dangerous forms in the riots that have taken place in recent years’ (2009, 11–12) which explains why the relationship between the two communities is tenuous ‘in spite of close friendships and networks among individuals and families’.

12. Kumar draws attention to the ‘exclusionist, corporate ridden, market-driven and anti-poor and anti-labour’ stance adopted by the Indian media which he argues ‘has completely failed to do justice in analysing the complex and emotional issues of multi-religious and multicultural Indian society in general and that of the minority communities in particular’ (2011, 59). This explains why the portrayal of Muslims and other minority communities is not only rare in mainstream Indian media but also promotes a stereotypical construction of their identity and lifestyle. In mainstream Hindi cinema, they are typically portrayed as gangsters and terrorists. Such propaganda argues Farooqui ‘leads to the essentialisation of Muslims as products of their pathological “nature” while absolving the political and social system of all responsibility in ensuring equity’ (2012, 60).
13. The Position Paper by the National Focus Group on Teaching of Social Sciences, NCERT or NCF 2006 points out that between 1975 and 2000 the Social Science curriculum remained utilitarian in its approach and issues like ‘poverty, illiteracy and casteism’ were regarded as ‘obstacles to national progress’ and ‘the common “illiterate masses” were blamed for having “failed the nation” (NCF, 2006, 3). This approach was unable to reflect “the normative dimension, like issues of equality, justice, and dignity in society and polity’ (NCF, 2006, 3). To bridge this gap NCF 2006 proposes the need to shift the focus of the Social Sciences from utilitarianism to egalitarianism. Through ‘a discussion of concerns such as threats to the environment, caste/class inequality, State repression’ (NCF, 2006, 3) it hopes to ‘awaken in the students a real concern for social justice’ (NCF, 2006, 4) and proposes the inclusion of the ‘perspectives of the adivasi, dalit and other disenfranchised populations’ (NCF, 2006, 4).
14. Under NCF 2005 the Civics curriculum in the middle school has been refashioned as Social and Political Life which draws upon the disciplines of Sociology, Economics, and Political Science. Civics was introduced in the Indian school curriculum in the colonial context to counter the ‘increasing “disloyalty” among Indians towards the Raj’ (NCF, 2006, 4) and inculcate ‘obedience and loyalty’ (NCF 2006: 4) among the natives. Political Science, in contrast, involves ‘the dynamism of a process that produces structures of dominance and their contestations by social forces’ and imagines civil society as the sphere ‘that produces sensitive, interrogative, deliberative and transformative citizens’ (NCF, 2006, 4). The NCF 2005 thus introduces a shift in the manner citizenship has been conceptualized. The textbooks introduced in the middle school are also called ‘Social and Political Life’.
15. The Dalits or SC are one of the most marginalized communities in contemporary India. However, they do not constitute a homogenous category and their status varies region-wise in terms of nomenclature and degree of deprivation. According to Oommen (2014, 57–58) while some of these groups ‘have achieved high upward mobility ... in the secular context due to their favourable response to modern education and consequent occupational

mobility' others have not been so successful. This internal diversity based on secular status amongst the SCs, has led many to 'argue for the abolition of caste-based reservation in India' on the ground that 'positive discrimination/affirmative action benefits only the strong among the weak'. But while the Reservation Policy has resulted in certain sections among the Dalits having 'benefited disproportionately' the 'vast majority among those who are entitled for benefits are yet to benefit or have benefitted very little from reservations'.

- 16 Manual scavenging is an age-old and dehumanising practice whereby a group of *safai karmacharis* or manual scavengers (from historically marginalised castes) are employed to clean dry latrines. Although the practice was declared illegal in 1993 lakhs of people, including women and young girls, mostly Dalits continue to work in private and community dry latrines managed by municipalities. Founded by Bezwada Wilson, the *Safai Karamchhari Andolan* is a human rights organisation that works for the complete abolition of manual scavenging in India.
17. The Reservation Policy in India aims at providing historically disadvantaged groups, namely Dalits (SCs), Adivasis (STs) and OBCs access to education and employment. Based on the provisions in the Indian Constitution, requires the Central and State governments to reserve seats/quotas at fixed percentages in educational admissions and employment in different government institutions.
18. 'Frame' according to Bernstein 'refers to the strength of the boundary between what may be transmitted and what may not be transmitted in the pedagogical relationship' (Bernstein, 1971, 50).

ORCID iD

Rupamanjari Hegde  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2981-2796>

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