

**SOCIALISING THROUGH
SAFFRON TEXTS:
AN ANALYSIS OF EKAL
VIDYALAYAS/ABHIYAN
IN ASSAM**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to understand the role of Ekal Vidyalayas in upper Assam in socialising gendered roles among its primary school students. Ekal Vidyalayas are single teacher schools operating in the tribal and under-developed regions of India and Nepal as an initiative of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a significant wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Over the years, RSS has emerged as a vehement defender of a Hindu nation. For this, it works tirelessly at the grassroots spreading its wings to the remotest corners of the country and to the most private spheres of life. Education is one vehicle that it uses. This work investigates the space that women occupy in making a Hindutva nation and how a Hindutva ideology perceives gender. These questions are addressed through curricula and the knowledge that these schools disseminate.

For decades there has been a debate on the relationship between gender and curricula. Even the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of India has been criticised for normalising gendered roles in society. NCF (2000) has been criticised for being communal and gender-biased (Bhog 2002). According to Bhog (2002) the mandate of the curricula is equality of all the citizens, fundamental rights and quality education for all children. However, NCF is confined to normalising traditional gendered roles of good mothers, wives or daughters first within the family and then in the country. Though efforts were made for a fair revision in NCF (2005), one cannot claim that it is inclusionary of marginalised sections or reflects the nuances of gender biases.

This brings one to the debate that curricula and pedagogy are politics of knowledge where not just inclusion and exclusion, but the narratives of those included, are based on ideologies. Apple (2000) argues that what schools must teach or what kind of knowledge should be more important is not just an educational issue; it is also very much a political and ideological issue. The politics of curricula have been shaped by a history of race, class, gender or caste. It depends on who designs the curricula and with what ideology one wants to disseminate knowledge. Going back to the NCF debate, a lot has been said about how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government tried to include its ideology in NCF (2000). The government was accused of ‘saffronising the curriculum’ for glorifying Hindu history without giving space for education to have a secular character. It has been established in writings mostly by ‘secular’ and ‘left-oriented’ writers that curricula designed and disseminated by Hindutva forces is communal, gender-biased and exclusionary. The debate went to the extent that Arjun Singh, who was supposed to take charge as education minister under the next Congress government, accused the BJP of ‘Talibanising’ the curricula (Guichard 2010). The government defended its position by arguing that it was an effort to decolonise the history of India. Colonial masters and the subsequent Congress government had distorted the history of Bharat in the name of secularism, which needed reformation,

and hence the drastic change in the curricula. The BJP also argued that it was not ‘Talibanizing’ but ‘de-Macaulization’ (Guichard 2010), an effort to free our history of the colonial hangover.

WHAT ARE EKAL VIDYALAYAS?

This introduction, which reflects the relationship between ideology and curricula, is an important entry point to this essay because Ekal Vidyalayas (now Ekal Abhiyan) are a part of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which believes in the ideology of Hindutva, where the nation is *akhanda* Bharat or a unified India. The image of the Bharat nation is Bharat Mata, a goddess dressed up as Durga with the saffron flag in her hand and the lion as her vehicle. Ekal Abhiyan designed the curricula to train young minds and teach ideas of Hinduism, not just as a religion but also as a ‘way of life.’ According to this thinking, the best ‘way of life’ is adhering to *bharatia* traditions as ‘good’ and ‘moral children’. Moral citizens should be disciplined and conditioned to fight against any force that tries to defame the nation, Bharat Mata.

Ekal Vidyalayas were first established in 1986 in Jumla district in Jharkhand. The available reports and excerpts from interviews show that the Ekal Vidyalaya model is borrowed from Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of ‘basic education’. Gandhi emphasised that children’s growth comes not just through textbook-centric education, but through their overall development in rural-based skilled work which is the heart of India’s economy. Hence, the VHP argues that the Ekal Vidyalaya (One Teacher’s School) ensures functional literacy for all children in the age group 6 to 14 years as it links them to formal schooling. The Ekal Annual Report 2018–19 states, ‘Ekal imparts informal primary education to 23,40,902 students enrolled as of 31 March 2019 in 86,401 villages in 25 states of India & Nepal. It has more than 50 percent girl child participation’ (Ekal Abhiyan 2018–19: 6) .

The operational structure of Ekal Vidyalayas has nine parts, where Ekal is at the grassroots. The first is *kendra* (the centre), second is *prabhag* (zone; currently there are 6 zones), *sambhag* (state; spread across 27 states), *bhag* (division; there are 67 divisions in total), *anchal* (district; the programme is spread across 327 districts all over India), *sanch* (block; there are 2,984 blocks with 30 villages each) and Ekal Vidyalayas (spread across 86,401 villages in India) (Ekal Abhiyan, 2018–19: 9). Six anchals make one bhag, and under one anchal there should be a minimum of 270 schools. A *pramokh* (head) is appointed to look after each section. The schools operate only till bhag. The parts above bhag look after official matters including the entire movement, funding and networking.

The Ekal annual report also mentions that the aim of the schools is not just providing literacy but also ‘inculcation of *sanskars*—good human values in children which is the essence of Ekal education model. These values include respect for teachers, parents and elders, care for nature and surroundings and pride for the culture’ (Ekal Abhiyan, 2018–19: 12). The concept of *sanskars* and how they are taught in schools is discussed in the next section. The education system in the schools is based on a five-fold system borrowed from Hindu religious texts. This five-fold education system is called *panchamukhi shiksha*, and includes the *prathamik shiksha* committee (primary education), the *arogya shiksha* committee (health education), the *gram vikas* committee (village/community development), the *jagaran* committee (awareness about legal rights) and the *sanskars* committee (moral sciences). The school curricula, which is part of *prathamik shiksha*, is divided into seven sections—basic arithmetic, language, general knowledge, moral science, physical education, fine arts and health education. It must be noted that the schools provide only a support education for the children who go to regular schools, or who have not entered formal schools yet. Therefore, a teacher takes the classes five to six days a week for three hours in the afternoon. The students are usually helped with their homework, basic reading and writing and the *sanskars* that Ekal Vidyalayas preach. Each class has about 25 to

30 students. The teacher divides the class into three sections, and each section is given different tasks to do. For example, one group is asked to do maths, the other group is asked to memorise a poem, and the third is asked to do the homework.

The curricula do not include any specific texts for the students. The schools only provide two reference books to the teachers. One is a pictorial book named *Ache Bacche Ache Kaam*, and the other is a mixture of songs, prose, poetry and riddles called *Khele Kude Naache Gaye*. These texts are written in Hindi and follow the panchmukhi shiksha model. The teachers assigned to take classes must undergo compulsory teacher training under the Ekal Vidyalaya Training Centres. The schools do not have a permanent building. They are cost-efficient schools where the teacher is paid Rs 800 a month. The schools run in temples, clubhouses or under the shade of big trees for which permanent structures are not needed. The schools, however, provide notebooks, pens and pencils. The teacher also has to check the hygiene of each student.

FIELD

After the first school was opened at Jumla in 1986, the second school was opened at the Talap Tea Estate (Doomdooma) in Tinsukia district in Assam in 1998. As mentioned earlier, Ekal Vidyalayas operate only in the tribal and rural regions in the country. My field of study was Tinsukia district in upper Assam, where the under-developed areas are mostly tea plantation regions. Hence, 70 per cent of these schools operate in the tea garden regions (Bhattacharya 2019).

My field of study, the Doomdooma Sanch, comprises of three sub-divisions—Talap, Doomdooma and Kakopathar—which operates 90 schools. I studied three schools in the Doomdooma sub-division. On the records, the schools run from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., but during the field visit in June-July 2019, I found that the schools did not open at 3 p.m.

due to the scorching heat. They started at around 5 p.m. and closed at about 7 p.m. If the schools were aware of my visit, they collected the students and started on time. Students in the studied schools were children of tea plantation workers. Their parents are barely literate, and most of them still live below the poverty line (BPL). The community can be broadly divided into two religious groups—Christians and Hindus. Christian missionaries came to this area long before RSS. As a result, the missionaries are responsible for taking care of their lifestyle, religion and education. Now the RSS has moved to the grassroots to work with the Hindu population. It works not only at providing a service, its hidden agenda in this region is also converting Christians back to Hinduism and stopping present conversions (Interview with the Ekal Vidyalaya Management, 1 June 2019).

However, the schools do not show open discrimination against children belonging to the Christian community. During my visit, there was a considerable number of Christian students in the class. During interviews, the volunteers and teachers said, 'Just like missionary schools accommodate all religions, we also have students belonging to Hindu and Christian communities. They come here for education, and education should be for all. If some reactionary parents do not want to send their children then it is their loss' (focus group discussion with the Ekal's management and teachers, 1 June 2019).

All the teachers in Tinsukia district are women. The minimum qualification for teachers is being Class 10 pass. They earn around Rs 800 per month for three hours of classes every day. The teachers are given a diary, the two books mentioned earlier and a lesson plan to be followed for a month. They are sent for training programmes before joining the schools. Ekal conducts teacher training every three to six months. Apart from teaching and collecting students, the teachers are also responsible for the evening *satsang*¹ by the end of every week. These are Hindu prayers and are also taught to the students by the teachers with the help of Ekal volunteers. Apart from this, they need to pay home visits for preaching Hinduism.



Students preparing for a class by singing the Saraswati Vandana.

HINDUTVA'S IDEA OF EDUCATION: A REVIEW

Ekal Vidyalayas form just a small unit of the extensive education system being operated following the Hindutva ideology. Not only RSS, but also governments like that of the Shiv Sena have tried to adopt curricula based on the ideas of a Hindu nation. Benei (2008) moves away from looking at nationalism as a violent act to everyday production of 'banal nationalism' (Benei 2008: 2). What she means by this is that experiences of nationalism are so integral to people's lives that this often goes unnoticed. This can be observed in a minute and banal everyday things like school uniforms and reading selective history, songs and stories. She writes that this routine form of banal nationalism is incomplete and is continuously in the making.

Studying the BJP-Shiv Sena government in Maharashtra, Benei (2008) looks at how the textbooks were given a colour of Hindu nationalism with elements of xenophobia, which can be seen in the way in which Muslims are represented. The idea that Muslims are invaders and Hindus are the original inhabitants of India is preached through textbooks and classroom teachings. Like Benei, Sundar (2004) worked on the curricula of Vidya Bharati operated schools called the Saraswati Shishu Mandirs. Sundar is vocal in her criticism of Saraswati Shishu Mandirs. She argues that these schools operated by RSS preach hate in the name of Hindutva education. The curricula and school practices she talks of are communal and distort facts about Indian history. She analyses how these schools can reach the lower-middle class sections of society with low fee structures and quality education. Parents do not necessarily send their children because these schools preach Hindu nationalism, but because they give good results, and as a result the ideology the schools propagate gets overlooked. Taking a more balanced stance, Freorer (2007) writes about the disciplinary practices of Saraswati Shishu Mandirs. She argues that discipline is the root of the RSS. Hence, in these schools' curricula there are courses where disciplinary training gets prominence. Says Freorer (2007: 4),

Couched in terms of "moral education", the pedagogical focus in the first few years of primary school is predominantly on physical discipline and bodily comportment. As we shall see, this emphasis begins to shift around class 3, and the strong physical orientation of the project takes on a more moral and ideological focus.

Freorer examines how the children should be physically healthy and morally sound to defend the nation they call Bharat Mata. She argues that though a host of scholars have focused on the ideology of hate propagated through Saraswati Shishu Mandirs, her objective is studying how primary school children experience the discipline and morality that the schools talk of. Further, she compares these nationalistic ideas with the RSS' overall curricula.

Scholars like Visweswaran et al. (2009) write not just about India but how RSS is a global organisation with its wings spread to most developed countries in the West. They write that RSS not only changed NCF (2000) but also attempted to rewrite the history of India in textbooks in America. The authors begin by giving a brief history of the RSS and its emergence. Started in 1926 in India, the RSS' religious wing, the World Hindu Council, or the Vishwa Hindu Parishad was founded in 1964. Its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party was first formed as Jana Sangh in 1956 which was named BJP in 1980. These authors claim that members of RSS had indulged in mass violence against minority religious communities like Muslims and Christians. However, during present times, the Sangh tries to:

present a more benign face through charity and educational work and has set up several partner organisations in the US, among them the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh in New Jersey and Overseas Friends of BJP with its headquarters in Edison, New Jersey (Visweswaran et al. 2009: 102).

In the summer of 2005, a similar organisation affiliated to the Sangh appeared in the California Board of Education to claim that Californian textbooks were giving a 'demeaning image of Hinduism'. The authors argue that there might have been a genuine issue related to the representation of the Hindu religion in the US. However, what caught their attention was that the organisation proposed to 'propagate false notions of Indian history, including the idea that Aryan was the original or indigenous inhabitants of India, and that the core of the essence of Hinduism could only be found in the Vedic religion of the Aryans' (Visweswaran et al. 2009: 102). The organisation thus completely ignored the tribal and other indigenous religions that have existed for ages. The authors also claim that the Hindutva movement can be linked to Italian and German forms of fascism that came into being during the 1920s and 1930s. These regimes also had similar ideas of revising textbooks with a communal and biased understanding of history and society.

Several studies on Saraswati Shishu Mandirs exist which follow both neutral and critical perspectives. However, though the Ekal Vidyalayas are branches of the RSS, they are not directly affiliated to Vidya Bharati's educational board. Instead, they come under a different wing that functions under VHP whose hidden motto is not just creating functional literacy but also defending Hindu religion among the Adivasi (tea plantation) communities in Assam. Moreover, these schools are not regular schools like Saraswati Shishu Mandirs, but can be seen as a form of alternate schools. Therefore, this study addresses this gap in literature related to Hindutva schools. It also focuses on the gender dimensions in Hindutva operated schools.

OBJECTIVES

This study is pertinent as there are Hindutva governments both at the centre and in some states. A common critique of the government is its promotion of an unsecular Hindutva regime. However, the government's point is that India should be a Hindu nation. Therefore, a careful study of school practices may help one explore the ideas that the Hindutva ideology preaches. A careful study of lesson plans and reference books used by teachers reflects how gendered the depictions are. This is useful for understanding the intersections of gender, class and caste at a different level to produce a significant ideology of what constitutes an ideal citizen of 'Bharat'.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper addresses the following questions:

1. What is the role of gender in curricula building, and how is it depicted in Ekal Vidyalayas' reference books?

2. How are the notions of masculinity and femininity constructed and then normalised through panchmukhi shiksha practices in Ekal Vidyalayas/Abhiyan?

Method

This study does an analysis of the textbooks, school observations and interviews with the schools' management and teachers. Three schools are selected for study in Doomdooma Sankul located in the tea plantation region in Assam.

An Analysis of reference books

The two reference books used by the teachers in the Ekal Vidyalayas are analysed through a thematic analysis where specific themes are drawn from primary observations of the text and through interviews. Before going into a detailed analysis of the themes, this section gives a brief introduction of the reference books.

Ache Bacche Ache Kaam

Ache Bacche Ache Kaam is a pictorial book designed with the idea of panchamukhi shiksha, as mentioned earlier. The book has been prepared by Sri Srinivas Panda assisted by Sri Ranjan Baag. The book is in Hindi, and each section has a theme where the pictorial depictions are also explained. The introduction to the book says, 'The source of our education comes from tradition, culture, society and saints. The educational system of Ekal is a mixture of these traditional knowledge blended with vocational knowledge.'

The book is divided into six sections. At the beginning of each section, there are bullet points explaining the pictures. The speaker speaks in the first person. The parts are divided into:

1. We are good children (*hum ache bacche hein*)
2. Family (*parivaar*)



Cover page of the book *Ache Bacche Ache Kaam*

3. Health (*swasthya*)
4. Self-dependence (*swavalambi*)
5. Morality (*sanskar*)
6. School (*vidyalaya*)

Khele Kude Naache Gaye

Khele Kude Naache Gaye means play, sing and dance. This book is meant for playful learning in school. The book is authored by the late Dr Rakesh Popli. The first page of the book has the Saraswati Vandana, a prayer offered to goddess Saraswati. Goddess Saraswati is known as the goddess of knowledge. The book is divided into five parts:

1. *Prerna geet* (inspirational songs)
This section includes verses from the Vedas that have to be learned along with some *slokas* in Sanskrit.
2. *Bal geet aur kavitayen* (children's song and poems)
This section includes prayers like bhajans, lessons about sanskar (moral education), science, and an introduction to



Cover page of the book *Khele Kude Naache Gaye*

certain fruits, rain, Diwali and Holi festivals and historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi. All these are explained through short rhymes.

3. *Kahaniyan* (stories)

The stories are related to birds and animals and stories of *mahapurush* (great men), stories from history, the Puranas and Upanishads and stories of festivals.

4. *Paheliyan aur jadoo* (riddles and magic)

This includes simple mathematical riddles, looking for hidden names and a mix of words.

5. *Khel aur yoga* (play and yoga)

This section talks of different kinds of games, couplets, yoga and *surya namaskar*.

Themes

The themes that emerge after a study of these two reference books are:

- a) Moral values and discipline
- b) Patriotism and nationalism
- c) Definitive ideas of masculinity and femininity

a) Moral Values and Discipline

The RSS' fundamental philosophy is protecting Indian traditions, which it believes lie in sanskars. Sanskars have a broader meaning connoting tradition, values or culture. The RSS argues that the Indian way of life is embedded in ethical and moral values and self-discipline. Freorer (2007) explains why bodily discipline plays an important role in Hindutva's idea of a nation and how it is transferred to pedagogic practices. First, she argues that the ideology is framed in various historical legacies. There were Hindu revivalist movements in the late 19th century that promoted the revival of Hinduism through personal discipline. These movements were influenced by the European concept that 'the source of national identity is located in the discipline of the body, and strong individual bodies would yield a strong 'social body' (Freorer 2007: 1,038). Second, the current Hindutva movement is also influenced by German ideas of nationalism and patriotism which emphasise self-discipline. Third, Freorer claims that early Hindu nationalism also comes from Gandhi's concept of bodily discipline and his belief in Hindu unity.

Finally, Freorer claims that the RSS' pedagogical process is also influenced by 19th and 20th century European values associated with being 'well-disciplined' and possessing a 'dutiful nature'.

Ache Bacche Ache Kaam has a number of pictorial depictions with explanations on how to discipline a body. This disciplinary attitude imbibed in schools is not specific just to Ekal Vidyalayas or other schools that operate under the RSS. However, the way the RSS takes discipline and morality in association with ideas to make and defend a Hindu *rashtra* is interesting.



Children chanting *Om*

The pictures are explained at the beginning of every chapter. The summarisation of the first section goes as follows:

- We wake up every day before sunrise
- We pray to nature god, earth and Bharat Mata
- Touch the feet of our parents and teachers
- We do *pranam* (greet with folded hands) to our teachers
- We always respect the elders of the village
- We greet our friends with *ram-ram* and love our younger ones
- We are polite to everyone
- That is why everyone blesses and wishes good for us



Hindu nation as Bharat Mata holding her children

These points reflect the kind of moral and bodily discipline that the books impart. Scholars like Bhog et al. (2011) maintain that the textbooks not only suggest that one should be a good citizen, but also the moral and physical qualities of how to be a good citizen. Bharat Mata, a feminine nation, is represented as full of nature. Nature is depicted in the form of rivers and mountains. Mountains are usually masculine and rivers like Ganga feminine, and the children are told that they should be respected and worshipped. Hence, there is a link between civic morality and patriotism. Only a moral child can become a good citizen and hence a patriotic one. Therefore, it is not always about violence, but doing 'good' by praying, remembering the (Hindu) gods and goddesses and following Vedas or Puranas are also patriotic acts. Waking up early and praying is something an ideal child should always do. However, it is not just praying to a god, but also to nature and the nation they call Bharat Mata. The nation is like a goddess that has to be worshipped and protected. The current image of Bharat Mata is influenced by Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay's play, *Bharat Mata*, which was first performed in 1873. This image entered Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's classic story, *Anand Math*. It influenced the nationalist imagery of the nation in the early phase of the struggle for independence. Hence, the image of the nation is portrayed as a mata, meaning mother/female. The Sangh picked up this connotation of Bharat Mata and created an imagined nation akhand Bharat or indivisible India. Therefore, the map shown in Bharat Mata includes Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Chauhan 2012). To glorify the present, the ancient past is brought up. In doing so, history and myths are confused for giving a Hindu picture of the nation. The nation is feminine, and hence there is the idea that she needs care and protection. Bharat Mata is also perfectly portrayed as a conventionally beautiful woman, well maintained and healthy, thus representing a nation that is perfect, healthy and beautiful.

Another point the book raises is touching the feet and greeting elders with pranam. Touching the feet is considered a useful marker for showing respect to elders. Besides elders, there are also instances

where the wife touches her husband's feet. The one who touches the feet is 'small' or inferior to the one whose feet are being touched. Therefore, to show utmost respect as children with Indian values, the book suggests that one should touch the feet of their elders. An Ekal Vidyalaya teacher said,

Earlier our tea garden children were not aware of Hindu sanskars. They did not know how to greet someone when he or she came home. The Christian children would say *jai Isu* (Jesus), but our Hindu children were not disciplined. Now they know that when they see someone they should greet him or her with *namaskara*. We teach them to offer a seat and water when some visitors arrive... we do this so that our community develops moral values... Ekal helps us in learning and incorporating the good values of Indian traditions.... (Interview with Ekal Vidyalaya teacher, 2 June 2019).

The text also focuses on saying ram-ram while greeting a friend. Ram is a god who was not only an excellent administrator as a prince but is also known as an obedient son, loving brother, fierce fighter and a lover. His kingdom was full of joy, peace and harmony. In short, he is often symbolised as the perfect man with all the essential qualities in such a man. However, Ram in contemporary times is also one of the most politicised gods. The debate associated with the Ramjanma Bhoomi and demolition of the Babri Masjid needs no introduction. Hence, I argue that greeting someone with ram-ram is not just a religious act but also a political one. On page 20 of the book, the author narrates the story, *Ram-Ram*, to show why taking Ram's name is essential. The story goes like this:

Shankar worked in a freezer plant. Greeting everyone with ram-ram showed his polite behaviour. One day, Shankar had to wait late to fix a machine. All his colleagues left, the lights were switched off and the gates were closed. The plant started getting cold. The cold was so severe that Shankar thought he would die that night if he could not find a way out. He was worried and kept thinking about how to get out of the plant. Meanwhile, he

felt someone approaching him. Shankar was relieved. It was the security guard of the factory. He felt god had come in the guise of the guard. When asked what he was doing that late, the guard replied, “brother, I realised someone did not greet me with ram-ram while leaving meaning that the ram-ram person might be inside. So, I came looking for you.” Shankar left thanking him and kept thinking about the miracle and power of greeting someone with ram-ram.

In this story, the term ram-ram is shown not just as a term of greeting like a hi or hello. Instead, it has connotations of a magical meaning and power as it is associated with a god. Hence, the students are advised to chant Ram’s name. In doing so, the text ignores students from different religious faiths. Also, rather than instructing students to have a secular way of greeting others, it makes the terms and terminologies extremely religious and non-inclusive of other religious groups. Ram-ram is also associated with being a polite and righteous person and hence likeable by others, whereas the mention of Sita during the discussion in the classroom is reduced to her being Ram’s wife. She is said to be a pious lady who was so faithful to her husband that she could not be burnt. Sita is an obedient and loving wife, who supported Ram on his good path of life.

b) Patriotism and Nationalism

Mayer (2000) contends that a nation can be a glorified ethnic group whose members are attached to a definite territory. The members of the nation relate to a common origin and share a common history and also hope for a common destiny. A nation can live without a state, but a state cannot live without a nation. Therefore, he argues that a nation is the soul which must be maintained at any cost. Stretching this idea he defines nationalism as ‘the ideology which members of the community, those who are of the same kind share...through which they identify with the nation and express their national loyalty’ (Mayer 2000: 1). The Hindutva idea of nationalism put forth the notion that

India, what is called Bharat, is a Hindu nation. For the propagators of Hindutva, Hinduism is not a religion, but a way of life. Hence, in its broader meaning anyone residing in Bharat irrespective of his or her religion is a Hindu. This ideology argues that other faiths such as Christianity or Islam are foreigners or invaders, whereas Hinduism and the religion that emerged out of Hinduism are the original inhabitants of India (Bharat) (Visweswaran et al. 2009). Therefore, as Mayer (2000) contends, nationalism is the function of internal hegemony. People who share belongingness are part of an 'imagined community'.

In this context, I discuss the RSS' worldview as its idea of belongingness, nationalism and patriotism through Ekal Vidyalaya textbooks. The project of constructing nationalism is based on gendered categories. The textbooks reflect a no less gendered dimension of Hindutva's ideas of nationalism. However, what needs to be mentioned here is that it will not be fair to just blame the RSS for designing gender-biased curricula. As mentioned in the introduction, studies have shown how the NCF itself is gender biased; the same goes for the curricula of other state boards. Though RSS has emerged as a separate institutional entity for Hindutva, a significant portion of the nationalist imagination along with reformist movements like that of Raja Ram Mohan Roy have derived their ideologies from Hindu religious texts. However, the RSS has emerged as a distinct entity protecting the 'pure' or Vedic form of Hinduism. It believes in the idea of creating a Hindu rashtra based on religious ideologies rather than secular ones. This work, therefore, looks at the position of women in the nationalist imagination of a Hindu rashtra.

Patriotism and nationalism are repeatedly reflected both in texts and school practices. During my field visit, the children recited a poem of Ekal Vidyalayas:

*Hum Sab Bharat Maa ke Saantan Hain
Aaj Maa ke Ankhon mein Ansu Hain
Hum Maa Ke Ansu Pochenge
Hum Dharti Ka Tagat Jageygey
Hum Desh ko Sukhi Banayenge*

*We all are children of Bharat Mata
Today, mother has tears in her eyes
We will wipe the tears; we will enhance the energy of the earth
And we will make this country a happy one*

When asked about the details of the poem, the management said *deshdrohis*,² like terrorists, are making our country unhappy. They create trouble and want to divide our country which is otherwise very peaceful. Therefore, the poem says that Bharat Mata is crying. Hence, the children are taking a pledge to wipe her tears. The children will fight against the evil energies in the country and make it a happier place to live (Interview with Ekal Vidyalaya Management, 1 June 2019).

The narrative portrays terrorists or people who want to divide India as anti-national. Hence, children are groomed to fight such people. This sort of narrative ignores the reasons for conflict created within the boundaries of a nation-state. The idea that otherwise the nation is happy is also problematic. It fails to address and deliver on social issues like caste discrimination, poverty or gender discrimination, and other sorts of social exclusion prevalent within the Indian social system. I acknowledge the fact that it is not easy to disseminate such complicated ideas to students at such a young age, but stories, poems, songs, plays or class examples can be used in creative ways to explain this to the students.

The RSS is often accused of propagating an aggressive form of nationalism. It believes in a feminine nation to be protected by Bharat Mata's masculine children. I argue that apart from creating a hyper-masculine, aggressive form of patriotism, the RSS is equally equipped to enter everyday lives of the citizens through banal ways. One of the best ways is through school practices and textbooks. The Ekal textbooks need not necessarily preach a violent form of nationalism, but nationalism by performing one's religious duties, following the paths of great men and elders, and presenting myths as the history of nationalism. Mayer (2000) argues that myths are essential in a nation's life. By embracing myths about the creation of a nation, the citizens perpetuate both national myths, and in the process the nation itself.

Here the Hindutva form of national myths is equivalent to religious myths taken from holy texts of Hinduism.

In *Khele Kude Naache Gaye*, there is a chapter titled *Itihas-Purana Aur Upanishadon Ki Kathayei* (Stories from History-Puranas and Upanishads). Puranas and Upanishads, the two holy books of Hinduism, depict mythical stories about wise sages, kings and queens and gods and evil forces. In many instances, these stories are narrated as history in the chapter. Here history and myth are confused and used interchangeably. For example, the book talks of mythical stories like the bond between lord Krishna and his friend or the dutiful son Sravan Kumar, which did not exist in history, but only in holy books as myths. Moreover, the book does not mention women. Only in a few instances, in other sections like ‘Mahapurush ki Kathayei’ (Stories of Great Men), is Rani Laxmi Bai mentioned. She is portrayed as a dutiful wife who sacrificed her life for the nation after her husband was killed by the British. Only two other women are mentioned in the book—Panna Dhai and Meera Bai. Panna Dhai is portrayed as a brave mother and an obedient servant. She is known as the woman who saved the baby prince, Uday Singh of Mewar, from killers by replacing him with her son. Hence, she is remembered in history as an ideal woman with values of self-sacrifice and loyalty to the nation. Likewise, Meera Bai is remembered as an ardent lover of lord Krishna. The story shows that despite having been born in a royal family and being married to a king, she only loved lord Krishna. When asked to self-immolate on her husband’s pyre, she refused saying she was not a widow as lord Krishna was her husband.

Thus, to create valour, patriotism and love for the country, mythical figures are portrayed as historical figures in these two textbooks (Visweswaran et al. 2009). There is also no story or pictures from other religions. The text tries to socialise children to Hinduism as a supreme form of religion. The women in stories on Rani Laxmi Bai and Panna Dhai are depicted as good wives, mothers or servants to the king. Their love for the nation is expected to reflect in grooming their children by giving them good moral values and lessons on how to love the country.

c) *Ideas of Masculinity and Femininity*

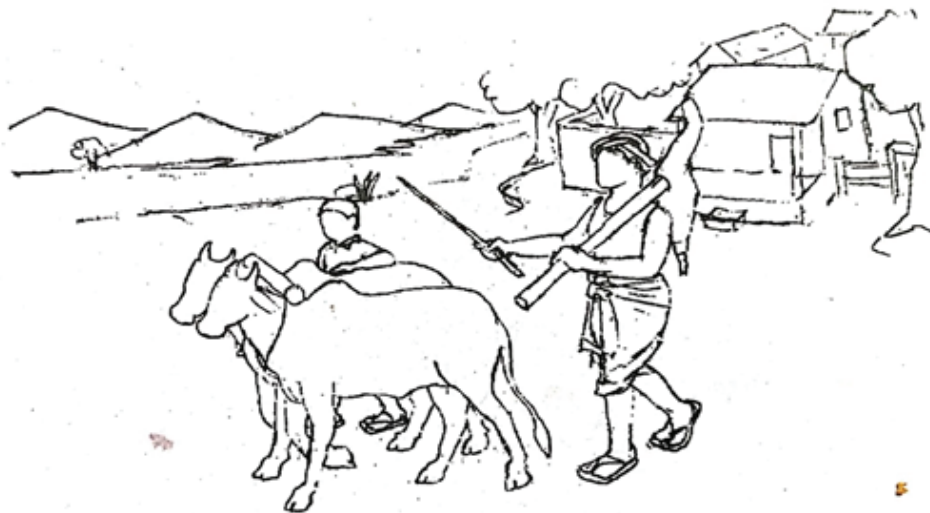
A discussion on nationalism and gender is incomplete without understanding the construction of gendered bodies in a nationalistic imagination. The nation is made of 'sexed bodies whose performativity constructs not only their own gender identity but the identity of the entire nation as well' (Mayer 2000: 5). In the process, there is the creation of both the 'other' and 'us' through performing accepted norms repetitively for constructing a privileged nation. These repetitive acts also construct gender and sexuality simultaneously. Therefore, one gender, one sexuality and one nation get preference in institutions of the state. Feminists see the whole enterprise of nation as a masculinised enterprise. They argue 'masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope' form the basis of the brotherhood of men (Enole in Mayer 2000: 6). The question here is: Do women share the same nationalist project as men? Scholars (Sangari and Vaid 1999; Sarkar 2001) have long argued that women are the biological reproducers of the nation. Added to this, they are also carriers of cultures and traditions. Hence, women's role in the national project is seen as biological reproducers, ideological reproducers, reproducers of an ethnic and national boundary, transmitters of culture and participants in national struggles (Davis and Anthias 1989). This is also related to women's symbolic status, which is connected to their reproductive roles as 'representative of purity' (Mayer 2000: 7). A pure woman can reproduce pure women, and without biological purity there is a threat to the nation's survival.

Hence, if women bear a national identity and have a role to play in the nationalist construction, then through education they are inducted to do this role (Bhog et al. 2011). Here the school serves as a primary agent for creating and normalising specific values, norms and ideals to set out the notion of good citizens, ideal women and men, ideal workers of the nation and so on.

These images in *Ache Bacche Ache Kaam* show the woman's role as a mother who is not only cooking, but also teaching her daughter

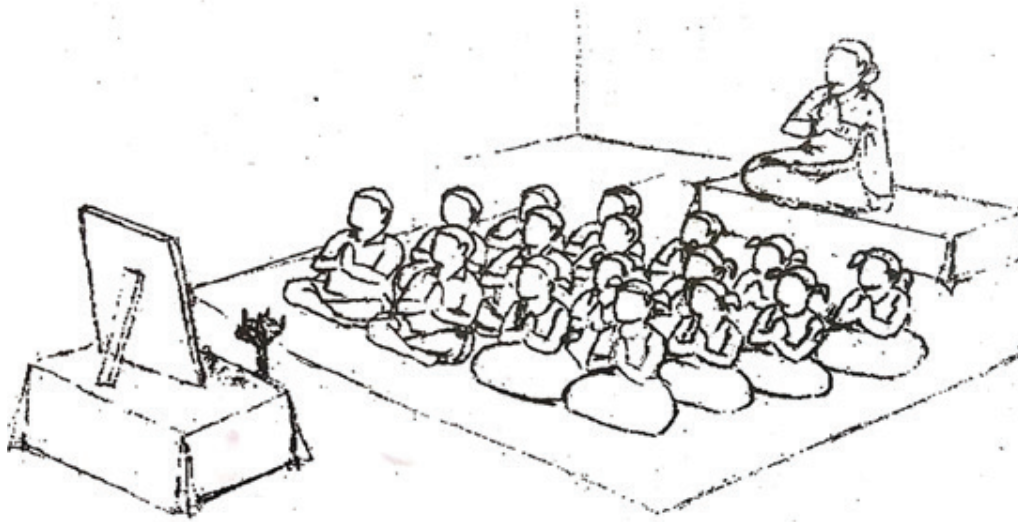


Mother teaching her daughter to make rotis



Father and son with bull and plough

to make rotis. The idea that the private is for women and the public for men is distinctively depicted in the textbooks. Women's roles are confined to taking care of the household, whereas the men are the only ones allowed to plough the land. The book has no women involved in farming or any other economic activity. Only in a few instances are women seen doing a public task, and that is reading a religious book and praying surrounded by other women and children.



A woman praying with a group of children

The Kothari Commission (1964–1966) argued that middle-class women in this nation are an ideal image of women who should share their responsibilities with men for a better nation. This elite narrative of women in work neglects the role of poor women who are always engaged in economic activities. It calls out to women to come out of their homes and contribute to the economy. Ironically, Ekal texts which are supposed to be designed for socially and economically backward students also fail to cover the dimension of working women. All women's activities are confined within the boundary of the family and household. These activities are not depicted as economic activities or paid labour, but as a role that the women should perform. They are also expected to pass on these values to the next generation of women.

There is an argument in feminist discourse that the nation was produced by the heterosexual male connected to patriarchal notions of hierarchies and norms. These norms enable men to claim superiority over women and the constructed 'other'. Hence, the intersection of gender, nation and sexuality becomes a discourse on moral codes. The men are the protectors, and women are the biological and symbolic reproducers. During the formulation of NCF (1975), it was clear that

population control was linked to women. Thus, it is men who have to control women's fertility and reproduction. Hence, an ideal woman is not just one who knows the alphabet, but one who has also controlled her reproductive power to serve the nation (Bhog et al. 2011: 52).

In contrast to this, Mayer (2000) argues that it would be too simplistic to see men as active and women as passive participants in nation-building. Women participate equally in culturally reproducing the nation, defending the society's moral code and taking part in controlling the 'other'. This point brings me to the interviews that I did with the teachers of Ekal Vidyalayas. Ekal also has a unit of health and hygiene apart from schools. Here all the teachers are women in upper Assam, and they are also given the task of making home visits and attending to the mothers. During an interview, I asked the teacher what her job involved besides teaching. The 25-year-old teacher replied,

Every week we have to visit the homes of community members. The visit is regarding satsang and lessons in health and hygiene as well as about our sanskars. We tell them things like the importance of birth control, menstruation, cleanliness, sending children to school and so on... during menstruation we ask them to be clean and not cook food during their period. It is a bad thing to do. At least we advise them to avoid cooking for four days and maintain strict hygiene. People are mostly daily wage labourers, and they drink a lot. We tell the wives how to save money, not to tell their husbands that they are saving money... women are the ones who take care of the children. We advise them to keep the children clean. For example, cutting their nails and hair on time, washing clothes, using clean plates, the importance of washing hands... there are many other things that we do... we also teach them the importance of *dhup-dhuna*³ and *tulsi*⁴. We also ask them not to convert to Christianity. Now many people who converted to Christianity are coming back to their earlier religion, which was Hinduism (Interview with Ekal Vidyalaya teacher, 8 August 2019).

I also interacted with the teachers to find out their ideas of married women, unmarried women, dressing sense and domestic work:

We believe that according to our Hindu traditions married women should maintain decorum. They should wear clothes keeping in mind the place... we ask them to wear long and thick *sindoor*. That is how a Hindu woman should dress. She should preferably wear a *saree* if she is in the village. It's her wish if she wants to wear a *suridar*.⁵ Usually what happens is that married woman who visit their maternal homes wear *suridars*, not the ones who live with their in-laws. The daughters-in-law are often seen wearing a *nighty* and roaming around. I personally do not like it as the *nighty* is made to be worn inside the home, not outside on the streets. A *saree* looks much better [speaks hesitantly]... (Interview with Ekal Vidyalaya teacher, 8 August 2019).

What should be noted is that not just femininity but masculinity too is equally a construct of society. Like women, men's behaviour too depends on existing social relations and social codes that predetermine it. Hence, the texts socialise girls to act in a particular way, and the men are socialised for specific roles and conduct.



Men as defenders

CONCLUSION

This study of Ekal Vidyalayas reflected not only on the official curricula, but also on Ekal's hidden curricula. Officially or overtly the schools have been established to impart value education to economically and socially backward communities in the country. However, a detailed analysis of the curricula, observations of school practices and interviews with the management and teachers showed the hidden curricula associated with the schools. The curricula is designed following a Hindutva model of education—panchmukhi shiksha. Worshipping Hindu gods and remembering verses of holy texts are synonymous with sanskars (moral values). Therefore, moral values are associated not just with civic qualities but also indoctrinated in religious rituals. The values socialise children to traditional gendered roles in the name of Indian traditions. The idea of family, for example, is portrayed as grandparents, parents and children (both male and female). This notion of family in the modern education system is too simplistic. The grandparents are only one set of grandparents, leaving the children to assume that they are paternal grandparents thus reproducing the same patriarchal notion of family excluding the mother's parents or her family. This notion extends the idea that after marriage women have no obligations towards their maternal families. Instead, they should wholeheartedly accept their paternal kin as their own.

Further, the pictures do not mention any sort of disability or LGBTQI+ people. The texts also show that the idea of nationalism is intrinsically related to a Hindu rashtra. Mythical figures are portrayed as historical figures and myths as the golden past of Bharat. Even the teachers appointed are trained to reproduce the same notion of patriarchy in the name of culture and tradition. A teacher's role is ironic, as on the one hand women teachers feel empowered, but on the other hand they act as agents of patriarchy.

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NOTES

1. The idea of satsangs was brought in keeping in mind the Sunday prayers offered by Christians in churches.
2. A Hindi term meaning anti-national
3. The Assamese term for offering prayers with 'incense stick and fragrance smoke'. It can also act as a mosquito repellent when used in the evening.
4. A sacred plant according to Hinduism. It also has great medicinal values.
5. An outfit comprising kurta, pyjama and dupatta.

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