

## Schooling Ideals and Student Culture: the Case of India

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**How are citizenship values translated into schooling processes in India? Rich ethnographies reveal how diversely students perceive, reproduce and subvert schooling intentions in a highly stratified society under the influence of peer cultures, media and marketing.**

Reviewed: *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India*, edited by Meenakshi Thapan, SAGE, 2014, 380 p., 43 €.

### Uncovering student experiences and schooling ideals

Every morning, the students of the Government Boys Senior Secondary School in North Delhi stand still for the morning assembly to sing the national anthem or other patriotic and religious songs. This ritual is meant inculcate national identity and deference to the students. However, the latter rather perceive these songs to be geared towards “the benefit of the officers from the Directorate, who may visit the school, ‘to keep them happy’.” (p. 165).

This vivid example perfectly illustrates the purpose of *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India*, which provides rich ethnographic evidence of the dynamics between the school authority, pupils, the ‘outside world’ and identities of religion and class. Its primary emphasis is to reveal the many ways in which citizenship ideals are constructed, imparted, and resisted in the pedagogic framework of schools in India. Through ethnographies of eight schools, this book reveals the ways in which citizenship education is imparted to its pupils, and by a focus on the peer culture, it examines the ways in which this education is either subverted or embraced by the students. To investigate how citizenship is translated into schooling processes, the perception of received schooling and student culture in contemporary urban India is thoroughly described and, the impact of attempts at indoctrination in Indian students is examined. What are the various messages conveyed by principals, teachers, and educational officials through the institutional setup of Indian schools? How are these values, principles and rules perceived, modified and subverted by students? *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India* focuses on student culture in the process of citizen shaping and is the outcome of a research project carried out under the guidance of Meenakshi Thapan at the University of Delhi’s Department of Sociology.

An important focus of this book is an emphasis on the perspectives of the students. Here, we are presented with two seemingly contradictory but coexistent experiences of schooling: on the one hand, we observe disciplinary framework in which the students construct their identity, such as, by agreeing to principles of obedience, equality, and frugality. On the other hand, we also observe that students do challenge these ideals, especially outside of the classroom. They are involved in a parallel construction of identity as gained from media, their social and cultural backgrounds; an identity which may not necessarily match the ideals laid down by the official tenets of their school. The authors, refer to concepts developed by Foucault, Bernstein, Durkheim, or Goffman, as their analytical frameworks to uncover how power and ideals of nationalism are imparted through the schooling process, and also reveals

ways in which they are challenged, to reproduce social, economic and political interests in a society highly stratified by gender, class and caste.

### **Deep insights into school and student culture**

The book's eight contributions address how students experience their schooling, and how they construct the imposed disciplining rules and hierarchies prevailing within their schools. Intense fieldwork enabled the authors to examine student culture by observing daily schooling processes, while informal discussions gave them access into the pupils' mindsets regarding the construction of their school worlds.

Detailed depictions of informal peer relations show a wide variety of reactions, from submission to the schools' declared values – e.g. equality, frugality or spirituality – to refusal to abide by them. This demonstrates how multi-layered the process of schooling is, underneath the varnish of official discourse.

This book provides rich ethnographic evidence by incorporating perspectives from all important actors in this pedagogic environment. It not only focuses on official rules and interviews with academic staff but lays emphasis in collecting data from observing classroom discussions and carrying out conversations with students outside of the classroom. It is by adopting this methodological approach that this book is able to provide a holistic picture uncovering the negotiation processes of the students and the academic staff. For example, in Bhandari's ethnography on the Christian school we are told that the school emphasises greatly on values of equality by making it mandatory to wear a uniform and not wear any jewelry or accessories (such as watches). Whereas an interaction with the students clearly reveals the ways in which they carry marks of their religion and class, as becomes evident in their choice of friends and consumption patterns.

Similarly, at a private school in rural Andhra Pradesh, students resist living in the school's "bubble" created by the school's rejection of "urban" values of consumerism regarding food, clothes, and entertainment. They challenge the school's ideal of frugality and the urban/rural divide it underpins by favouring and sharing "urban" products. This demonstrates how identities of being urban or rural, frugal and consumerist, are intermingled despite the schools' proclaimed ideals. Correspondingly, in a Muslim girls' school in Ahmedabad, religious and regional identities are expressed, while multiple identities such as "modern, global, Muslim, Gujarati, Urdu-speaking" are negotiated internally (p. 257). These examples convey contrasts of publicly pronounced and hidden values and identities within schooling environment.

### **Gaps between the intentions of schools and students' perceptions**

The studies by Deka, Gogoi, Thapan, and Dore of schools in Delhi, Ahmedabad and Andhra Pradesh particularly reveal great lacunae between the ideals of citizenship set by schools and actual student practices. Citizenship education, and the ideal of a "good citizen" - which includes being disciplined, obedient, frugal, humble, and spiritual - is partly adopted, but also subverted by students, who resist and question the ideals imposed by schools amongst their peers. While students touch their teachers' feet as a traditional sign of respect (p.115), they also challenge their authority by making faces or nicknaming them (p.197). In another example set in a private school in Delhi, nationalist ideals and "Hindu" identities of disciplined behavior and modest dressing are imposed, while so-called "Western" values are condemned. Deka observes how students are yet strongly influenced by popular culture, media, marketing, and branding. They wear denim, value phones, and listen to "Western" music, although their school denounces this. At the same time, they enjoy traditional Indian

folk music and enjoy classical Indian dance. Influenced both by “Western” and “Hindu” cultures, students fuse these in their perception of “being Indian”. Thus, stereotyped notions of the ideal Hindu and the seductive “Westerner”, as respectively promoted and rejected by the principal of the Hindu school, mingle into hybrid student perceptions.

Bhandari, Gogoi and Dore’s contributions demonstrate how gender, caste and class hierarchies experienced in schools are also internalized in peer groups. At a Christian Convent girls’ school in Delhi, boyfriends from “good” schools count as status symbols. Likewise, at a Delhi state school, appointed head boys or head girls enjoy admiration and respect, and those who behave in accordance to school-set norms gain popularity among their peers.

Sharma’s paper provides an insight into gendered relations and behaviors, addressing both peer- and teacher-student relations. For instance, teachers will – unconsciously perhaps – privilege boys through praise and encouragement. Other examples include the fact that during PE classes, teachers have to protect girls from being cheated (p. 55). The author also quotes a four-year-old boy who rejects bindis and nail polish in terror, stating “I am a boy” (p. 46). One can therefore assume that gendered codes of behavior and attributes, such as outfits and physical strength, are internalized at an early age. These examples show how class hierarchies and gendered structures are reproduced, as well as principles of discipline and obedience.

### **The need for dialogue to integrate multiple realities**

The eight ethnographies clearly reveal a lack of dialogue between the principal, teachers, and the students. At one level, this becomes obvious in the school’s inability to clearly communicate its basic tenets or ideals to the students. For example, in a Delhi state school, the houses are named after Indian revolutionaries, who symbolize “dynamic action for self-improvement” and Gandhi’s ideals of peace and non-violence (p. 143). However, students neither know about these leaders nor do they feel attached to them. At another level, it also brings to focus the role and duty of teachers, and the ways in which they negotiate with expectations from the school and the pupils. Regarding a lack of discussion and negotiation in classrooms, the book opens the debate on whether the values, principles, and rules transmitted in schools truly meet the skills needed by children and youths from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in contemporary urban India. Memorization rote-learning, as practiced in Indian schools (p. 177), do not promote intellectual curiosity, criticism and communicative skills as required in a rapidly changing society, in which decision-making becomes increasingly important.

The contributions are descriptive, and do not state or analyze a normative postulate, although they covertly argue that schools need to acknowledge and integrate student voices and the social, political, and cultural influences they are exposed to. Schooling in India, when seen as transformative process from a critical pedagogy perspective (Freire 1996, Giroux 2004), which aims at questioning rather than accepting existing power relations, needs to provide spaces for both students and teachers, where they can express themselves individually, and participate in shaping their schools’ identities. However, the book omits political implications, consequences or strategies which may overcome the gaps that it identifies. Indeed, the ethnographical approach focuses on depicting daily experiences. Thanks to this however, readers can immerse themselves in the students’ lives and thereby gain a deeper understanding of their agency within the hierarchical structures they are exposed to. Against the backdrop of a society highly stratified by caste, class and gender, *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India* uncovers through vivid portrayals how the schools’ messages of equality, discipline and respect are partly reproduced, but also questioned and subverted by students.

### **References and further reading**

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