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SELF AND ITS RESPONSE TO STRUCTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOLING

Abstract

Schools are functionally important institutions and have been studied sociologically for some time now. This paper is based on an interactional analysis of certain everyday experiences of students in a school. It draws inspiration from previous works conducted under the aegis of the Symbolic Interactionist paradigm. 'Self' which is a popular sociological concept has been operationalised to observe how students negotiate with their identities within schools and how schools and their social ecology contribute to the same. While the 'self' may be most effectively studied by observing gestures, actions, conversations, experiences, process of meaning formation etc, it has been observed that certain structural factors like Gender, Caste and Class, Religion and Nationalism leave daunting impact on the process of self-negotiation. This paper explores select case studies to observe the phenomenon of convergence of individual self with social structures.

Keywords: *Symbolic Interaction, Self, School, Classroom, Identity, Gender, Caste, Class, Religion*

This paper looks at the 'self'¹ as subject of sociological analysis and deals with its operationalization among students in a very specific context of schools. 'Self' is a popular, often used concept in symbolic interactionism. While it may have varied philosophical connotations², for the scope of this paper, we restrict its use as a conceptual tool borrowed from Symbolic Interactionism. Sociologists like C.H. Cooley, G. H. Mead, H. Blumer contributed extensively to the literature on 'self' and operationalised it to study the making of a social being based on experiences, social interactions, meaning formation etc. They believed that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings of things for them; that the meaning of such things derives from the social interaction one has with one's fellows; and that these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process. (Blumer 1969: 67). The process of meaning formation is a complex one and is subject to social ecology, biographical history of individuals, communities and groups. It is this 'process'

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that is central to symbolic interactionist studies. If one is observing 'self' of an individual or theorising on it, the impetus is not on 'what' the self is, it is rather 'why' is it the way it is, 'how' did it come to become so. This has provided great scope for symbolic interactionism to shed and imbibe new paradigms ever since its inception. Hence, its immense influence on qualitative sociological research like *Street Corner Society* by W.F White (1943), *Asylums* by Goffman (1961), *Education and Society in Changing Mizoram* by Lakshmi Bhatia (2010), *Ethnic Minority Identity: A Social Psychological Perspective* by Nimmi Hutnik (1991) among others. Schooling and education are one of the most popular subject matters for inquiry in symbolic interactionism. It has been used to study interaction patterns between students and teachers, students and students, analyse impact of these interactions and the social situations they create, educational experiences of individual students, processes of discrimination and labelling, socialisation³ etc.

This paper views schools as definitive educational spaces that also happen to be fertile ground for socially meaningful interactions⁴. It is where young minds learn and are initiated into the collective. In all of this the individual student is not just going through an academic experience but also experiences of socialisation, evolution of their identity, forging networks, embodying their physical self, realising their strengths and weaknesses. Schools have enjoyed a certain amount of privacy due to a perception of their specialisation and sacredness. Hence, a lot of what happens within schools goes unnoticed as value neutral, knowledge dispensing and rite of passage. However, an empirical and scientific study of schools helps demystify the process of schooling while understanding what happens inside iron gates of schools.

Upon assessment of data recorded in different schools for the purpose of a doctoral study in the years 2018, 2019 and 2020, it was observed that as students operationalise their 'self' school, there is significant and repeated presence of specific social structural themes in the everyday interactions of classrooms, such as:

1. Gender
2. Caste and Class
3. Nationalism

These become significant in the sense that they emerged frequently and fervently in the interactions, actions, decisions and conversations of students. These aspects are significant since, questions on 'self-concept' of students was largely about how they see themselves, define themselves, identify themselves in terms of social groups like gender, caste, class and nation. These exist parallel to individual traits and labels being carried by students like intelligent, brilliant, trouble maker, uncivil etc.

In the course of this paper, we see these structural-systematic processes

as being enmeshed with individual interactional ones. The entanglement of structural and Interactional processes reveals to a great extent 'how' the development of 'self' happens in individuals.

DATA AND METHOD USED:

The proposed study employs qualitative approach, to explore and understand meanings and subjectivities that exist in the field. Universe of the study would be students belonging to government schools and private schools. In order to locate subjectivities in the field, attempts are made to collect data from two distinct realities or two distinct sites, situated in Kharghar, Navi Mumbai:

1. Sub-urban working-class reality (school B): visited thrice a week for a period of six months ranging from April 2018-September 2018.
2. Urban Middle class reality (school A): visited thrice a week for a period of six month ranging from September 2019- February 2020.

The data has been collected over a period of time from two different schools situated in Kharghar, Navi Mumbai. Field visits to respondents and the school in question continued after the said period due to the need of the research to go back and forth into the field. Timings of field visits were subject to permission granted by individual school authorities, final exam schedules, holidays etc.

The first is a Zilla parishad school, which is frequented by most of the families in a sub urban working-class reality. The second is a private school catering to families living in the urban middle class reality. The sociological logic behind the above-mentioned selection is to practice a method of comparison. Comparison of these distinct subjectivities, as the reader will see, helps us locate structures and processes within the classroom settings. This also helps map negotiation of 'self' set in these distinct subjectivities.

SAMPLE: three students from standard six of each of the two schools have been observed. The study looks at students from standard six because by the time a child enters standard six, they have already spent four to five years as part of formal schooling system and hence expected to be aware of the norms and values operating in the system. Respondents have been selected on the basis of categorization and labelling⁵ of students witnessed in classrooms; that is, as per categories revealed by the specific field locations themselves. As mentioned before, context is an important pivot in terms of the different categories likely to emerge out of different contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: The study is guided by Symbolic Interactionist framework; it entails interpretation of roles taken over by an individual while interacting with different actors. That is, attempts have been made to observe '*what and how*' many roles does an individual occupy, *what* is

the nature of interactions they indulge in, the *when and where* of these interactions, meanings being constructed and *how*. To achieve the same, significant symbols and gestures are keenly observed while on field. In order to do this students' responses and gestures have been observed in the varying social environments they participate in, that is; observing a student's responses and actions while with peers and with teachers or while with parents, and analysing their differences or commonalities. This study does not look at students as part of a classroom divorced from their social, economic and cultural realities, but as members of their respective households which are in turn part of a given community and is set in a given socio-economic location. 'Self', in this study, becomes a reflection of their social identity, various attributes of self-image, meaning creation and interpretation of social situations and social issues. The theoretical framework has been operationalised by employing case study method. The technique of interviewing is used to get an idea of how everyday activities in classrooms lead to the development of a 'self' concept among students. Attempts are made to interview parents, siblings and friends outside the school.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: in the course of the research precautions were taken so as to maintain confidentiality of respondents, their friends and families. The effort has also been to keep participants duly and fully informed of the procedure of the research.

The data collected during research is conversational and experiential in nature and has been presented in a similar manner in the paper. De-alienating it from its analysis would make it devoid of its effectiveness and it would cease to make the intended impact on the reader.

GENDER

It is widely acknowledged that schools play a vital role in shaping identity of students. Gender-normativity is widely taught and encouraged at school. It seems 'natural' that in the process of becoming 'someone', one must have firstly mastered behaviour as per their respective genders. Hence, schools emphasise on 'discipline', 'decent behaviour', 'decorum' etc, with the aim of instilling a morality (by standards of the collective social) in creating 'good girls' and 'good boys'. It is one of the essentials to being a suitable, complying, well placed social being. While one's first figments of gender and its operationalisation happens at home within the family itself, schools mostly play their part in reinforcing what has been learnt at home (sexual division of labour), gender-based socialisation, chronological initiation into one's gender (teaching students age and gender appropriate behaviour). Though there is hardly any formal space or time period allocated to the same, schools have implicit methods and rituals that enable students to 'learn' their gender. In this section, gender is discussed in terms of dominant expectations out of girl and boy students in each of the schools, the subsequent ground realities, activities, gestures of students and the tendency to be labelled or tagged

depending upon the degree of shock their actions garner.

The expectations of students and even teachers to behave in line with their respective genders is borrowed from the hegemonic, heteronormative standards set by the dominant collective social. The class teacher in both schools often addressed the class as 'girls and boys'. This is also the most common and often used method of categorising students and reinforces gender binary as being 'normal' or being the 'norm'. Even though students (of the ages twelve, eleven, thirteen) were aware of terminology like LGBTQ, same sex relationships and social-cultural taboos associated with them, it was an implicit understanding that being a girl or a boy was the norm and though there were others, they lie beyond the scope of normal everyday encounters of these students. They are seen as a distant reality. Once the duality of genders is taken for granted there comes the expectations associated with each gender. Hence, boys in both schools were assumed to be assertive, dominating, loud and foul mouthed, rowdy, aware of the cardinal distinction between what counts as masculine and feminine, focused on career. The 'boys will be boys' attitude pervaded teachers and students of both schools and was something that 'just had to be dealt with'. Teachers in both schools (not all teachers though) were of the belief that boys must be disciplined only to the point they do not stop being boys. One of the teachers from the private school (school A) said

'Discipline at the cost of identity is of little use. After all, the society expects them to be a certain way. Wouldn't we be harming them by placing them under severe pressure to not do things that other boys or their role models do?'

Girls too, were expected to model after some dominant feminine traits like docility, understanding, sensitive, poised as compared to boys, giving, elegant body language, a clean language among others. These expectations existed, within schools and also in other social experiences of students. Hence, students too were conscious of most of it, whether or not they lived by it in action. The pervasiveness of these gendered expectations became evident via social interactions. One of the most common instances noted in classrooms of both schools was when groups of girls and boys would indulge in arguments that turned into fights. Both, girls and boys would tend to become loud, use language and gestures to hurt the opposite group. When the squabbles reached teachers, they would scold both groups. To the girls they would say that they should complain about the boys to authorities directly instead of picking fights with them. They were reminded that bad behaviour, usage of loud, bad words was expected off boys, not good girls. Girls would often be pacified by being called the intuitive and sensitive ones out of both the groups. Even though teachers discouraged the behaviour of boys as being 'bad', 'hooligan like' they immediately sought to normalise it by saying this is how boys usually are as if to say what else would one expect out of them. It was taken for granted that boys would shout, scream and use abusive language; girls, usually would be

expected to respond in mild, muted manner.

While gender-based rules and expectations were laid out before students, not all toed the line. The epistemic advantage of the theoretical framework of symbolic interaction is realised at this juncture. It gives access to the here and now of individuals. One gets to observe the lived reality in the form of minor or major deviations of individuals from ideal typical, generalised and expected behaviour. The differences between how life is lived and how it ought to be lived become evident. Individuals are likely to negotiate; in the form of dialogue between 'I and Me'⁶ as a result of which their actions emerge as a more 'practical' version of abstract norms, are more suited for their everyday and are based on convenience. Consider the following account for the sake of clarity:

Manju has been a student of class 6B in the Zilla Parishad school (school B) with the same teachers and friends for four years. At the beginning of the academic year (month of April-May), Manju was promoted to standard 6. According to her teachers, Manju had a sharp mind and had fair chances of studying till standard twelve if she does not drop out due to various socio-economic factors. A fairly common occurrence at school B where girls would drop out due to marriage or to find employment. Though teachers describe Manju as bright she does not qualify as a 'good student'. The popular opinion about Manju is that she is *badtameez* (ill-mannered or rude), she is ill-mannered, impolite and discourteous. On one of the first encounters with Manju during field work she enters her class running alongside the boys of her class; skids inside the door causing the class to break into a riot. Manju has a way of making her entry noticed by the teachers and students. She does not enter the class as much as she blasts into it. The class teacher, who was in the middle of a lesson, gets angry at all of them for coming late to class and entering in a manner as to create a scene. She threatens to complain to the principal of the school. Amidst all this, Manju struts to her bench, stroking her hair. The class teacher calls out to her and says

"Manju I am noticing your 'style' these days. You are becoming hopeless just like the boys. You were always running around with them, now you are becoming one of them. Ask your mother to speak to me."

The tag of being '*badtameez*' has stuck with Manju, as it was validated by her peer group, teachers and family. Her behaviour is confusing and shocking to many. Though she dresses and does her hair just like other girls and has good friends in class who happen to be girls, she is loud mouthed than most of her classmates, she is foul mouthed like most boys in her class, during break time she would rather run around the school and neighbourhood than sitting inside her classroom sharing lunch with other female friends of her. She fails to conform to the gender norm on more than one instance. Teachers wonder if this is the right age for her to be behaving the way she is.

Six months into the academic year, the school reopens after a long stint of holidays. The school shuts for summer break in the early days of May and reopens in June, only to have its calendar spluttered with festivals and national holidays until August. Finally, after the grand Ganpati puja, the schools (especially the municipal schools in Maharashtra) run smoothly up until Dussehra and Diwali. Many families (most of which fall under the category of working-class migrants) use this time period to return to their home towns and villages (*gaon*). The implication it has on students is that they travel with their parents without certainty regarding their return. For female students there is the added pressure of marriage around adolescence, hence many may not come back to school at all. Manju, too, visited her village in the holidays. She did not return to school after the holidays. Teachers wondered if she would return or be married off in her village itself. But she did return, and was greeted by shock and surprise. Manju appeared to be a whole new person. She had lost weight drastically; became shy, timid and would always compliment teachers on their clothing style. She has learned to walk and gesture her hands in effeminate style, something she did not do before and probably picked up in the village. Her radius of physical mobility has reduced drastically to just a few other benches other than hers. What could have possibly happened so as to result in such drastic change? It is also remarkable that the change is consistent with the intentions of the previous labelling and name calling by teachers and peer group. Conversations with Manju, her parents and some close friends reveal some probable causes. Most of her inner circle or significant others⁷, were relieved with the change. Her parents said they were 'grateful to god for finally knocking some sense into their girl'. Manju, upon arriving to her village got her first menstrual period. Menarche represents entrance into womanhood. Menstruation is at the centre of the body politics of women. Women's subjective sense of their 'self' is undisputedly built around the various phases of menstruation. The sexualisation of female bodies is likely to start at menarche.

"Menstruation is a biological act fraught with cultural implications, helping to produce the body and women as cultural entities." (Lee 1994: 343)

In the time Manju spent in her village she was made to realise the social and cultural significance her 'feminine' body now holds due to menarche, by the elder women of her extended family. Her mother recounts telling her that "now that she is a grown woman, she must behave like one. Women who menstruate cannot run around the way she does. If she doesn't repent then she would be made to stay back in the village with her aunts and grand aunts who would discipline her." Upon constant policing by her family, in the absence of her peer group, Manju's 'self' seems to have witnessed a debate between 'I and Me'. She finally brokers herself a deal (a middle path). She would mend her ways if she would be permitted to attend school in the city again. Her mind is overcome with the chiding of teachers in school, duress of her family

and the subtle reminders of societal norms. All of it collectively pushes her towards conforming to the set patterns of feminine behaviour. The fact that this behavioural change was welcomed by teachers at school and parents at home and most of her peer group, reinstates the correctness of the same for Manju.

CASTE & CLASS

In the course of field work, it became evident that social categorisation of urban spaces can hardly be looked at from any singular vantage point. One observes intersections with respect to modern and traditional modes of categorisation, which emerges frequently in the case of caste and class location. There have been longstanding sociological debates about class superseding caste as the dominant and effective mode of vertical stratification. What seems to keep sociologists engaged in this debate is the vast overlap between the two, since both are historically associated with occupation. While, some believe that modernisation, liberalisation of the job market is 'likely to dilute the importance of caste in economic calculations' However, Divya Vaid writes otherwise. She believes modernisation and liberalisation do not have the expected result on social mobility. Erstwhile untouchables and scheduled castes still find it difficult to move from their traditional occupations. And when they do, they find roadblocks in terms of acceptance from the people. Divya Vaid writes

"it is at the extremes of the caste system that the overlap of caste and occupation persists. For example, priests are still predominantly Brahmins and sweepers are often from the lowest castes. It is in the Middle where all the fluidity and mobility occurs" (Vaid 2012: 402)

For this paper, the endeavour has been to identify *where, how and why* caste and class-based strains emerge in interactions of the respondents and if it is recognised and acknowledged by the respondents in any way. The idea is not to impose abstract understanding of caste and class by the researcher on her respondents. The research proceeds with a firm belief that consequence of this mode of social categorisation is evident in social interactions at schools and hence must be captured as part of the process rather than an abstract social fact.

The students' understanding of caste can be explained as following:

In the context of the two schools observed for the purpose of the doctoral research, students displayed a subtle understanding of caste. To some, caste, *jati* and *dharma* were interchangeable terminologies which highlighted the engagement of one's caste location with religious ritual practices. To some others it signified an obscure category they thought was no longer relevant to their lives today. To many more it meant 'community' and hence existed in the ways of living and socialising of their communities. The importance of this

was highlighted in the frequency of sentences like *mere yaha aisa nhi hota* (where I belong to, this is not how it is done), or '*humlog*' (our people) etc.

The discourse in school A is oriented towards class, while caste seemed to be conveniently absent in the understanding of most of the respondents. The demography which school A caters to can at best be described as New Middle Class⁸. Leela Fernandes (2006: 2) conceptualises the 'new middle class' as a category of white collar, English speaking, segment of Indians whose origins as a group can be traced back in history as benefiting from the British introduced English education. They maintain their distinction by acquisition of different kinds of capital and using it for continued upward mobility. They also believe in the ethic of 'ability' or 'merit' and hence acquire capital to justly enhance their odds at achieving success. It is noted that the association of caste –class is weaker here, in terms of respondents' acknowledgment of presence of the same in their immediate social network. This seems congruent with Vaid's proposition that there is weakening of caste-class association in the middle of the class schema. However, upon observation it was found that the middle class despite mingling and forging networks across caste barriers rely heavily on a 'middle class consciousness' that may not absolutely be free of traditional, caste-based morality. The respondents own style of looking at social encounters and interactions are dependent on a convenient mix of traditional, caste based (community) value systems and modern liberal ones. They display tendency to read into the overlap of caste-occupation-class.

This may be aptly observed from the case of the following respondent:

Eesha, a student of class 6D at school A, has had a hard year adjusting to the peer group. Though a student of the school since kindergarten, Eesha was mostly devoid of company and since, she was mostly by herself, it made it convenient for other students to pick on her. Most of the students in class were fairly familiar with each other and their families, having studied together for five years and more. They also happened to live close by the school and near each other's apartments which made out-of-school association among them possible. Though none of Eesha's classmates live in the same building as her, she does have out-of-class interaction with her classmates through study groups, Parent-teacher meets, WhatsApp etc. Via these interactions her classmates (and their families) became familiar with her family and her parents' job profiles. It turns out that their occupation quite often made her object of ridicule. Her classmates felt that her parents' jobs were 'different' from other parents. Her mother runs a beauty parlour in a rented space near the school and has provided home services to mothers of her classmates in the past. Her father, used to work as a cook in a local restaurant, has only recently taken up a white-collar job at a corporate.

The happenings in school gained sociological context upon interviews with Eesha and her parents. During one of the early interviews, Eesha's parents

identified themselves as *Dalit*. *Dalit* literally translates into ‘crushed underfoot’ or ‘broken into pieces’ and owes its popular usage to the 19th century works of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and its later political pursuit by Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. *Dalit* or the present day Scheduled Castes in India are the muted category in the *purusasukta* of the *rig veda*, that is, it does not find its origin in the divine body of *Brahma*. The four castes namely *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vashya* and *Shudra* are said to have originated from *Brahman*’s holy body. The *dalit* however does not and is therefore the unborn.

“The dalit is the unborn who has no physical link with the supreme being” (Ghose 2003: 84)

The *dalit* body, excluded from the sacred is considered ritually impure, suppressed and perennially dirty from cleansing the realm of the collective social. Their economic trade is associated with traditionally impure tasks such as cleaning out waste and cleaning of the body pollutants like hair, nails and excreta. Their traditional occupation, tied to their low status in the social hierarchy, their subsequent exploitation and discrimination and a resultant sense of low self esteem and respect in terms of how others viewed them. Caste status is invariably tied to a notion of one’s self respect.

“Their role in the caste based economic system meant that the modern dalits descended from the professionals of impure task, are heirs to centuries old filth, professional as well has psychological.” (Ghose 2003: 89)

One of the historical implications of years of exploitation and disdain and its perpetuation in the modern, liberal society may also be internalisation of past experiences as psycho-social facts. For example, association with narratives of the past, famous/infamous accounts of suffering of Dalits may inspire the spirit to fight back and rise up against suppression but experiencing a perpetuation of similar instances may also lead to loss in self-respect, misty self-concepts in general. Awareness of one’s caste identity plays a pivotal part in fashioning of group identity of individuals in general. It may translate into emphatic assertion of the caste based attributes upon growing up, in the process of socialisation.

For the purpose of this paper ‘*self-respect*’ associated with group identity would be operationalised so as to gauge the interactional presence of caste in modern Indian classrooms. The term ‘self-respect’ has been deeply associated with caste identity and honour of caste groups in a society where caste continues to be a very significant determinant of individual’s and group’s social location. It is reminiscent of the ‘Self-Respect Movement’ in Tamil Nadu⁹ (which captured imagination of people beyond Tamil Nadu as well) which provided a counterforce to the cultural supremacy and brahmanical domination, exploitation and disrespect meted by the ‘upper castes’. The movement was built on the belief that one’s notion of self-respect might be deeply tethered to one’s understanding and experience of caste (and hence all culture, work, rituals

associated with it) as ‘superior’ and inferior’.

Eesha’s family is aware of their caste identity. Eesha is not aware of the exact nomenclature of her community (which she refers to as *mere yahan*) but participates actively in religious cultural rituals at home (often missing school for days to attend *yatras* and *satsangas*) and takes the ‘cohesiveness’ (observed from her excitement in attending festivals, dependency on family) of her group very seriously. They could rightly be called a significant other for her. Naturally, she is humiliated and hurt at the ridicule directed towards her parents.

In one of the interviews with some of Eesha’s female friends, her mother’s occupation as a beautician was revoked. Eesha is often remembered by their mothers as ‘daughter of the parlour lady’. A lot of these students have also been discouraged by their parents (casual disapprovals) from becoming ‘best friends’ with Eesha. Following is a brief conversation with some of Eesha’s classmate.

“obviously we speak to her. We know her since standard 1. But we do not want to get very close”

Why is that

“she is not cultured. I mean she does not come from as good a family as me and my friends”

What is a good family?

“her mother also works. And she gives home services to our mothers. Obviously none of us want to become like that. It is not respectable.”

“I actually saw her cleaning up after. It was dirty. No body’s parents would want their children to become like that after going to such a good school”

Many students have similar stories about Eesha and have been asked by their parents to steer clear of her. This explains to a large extent why Eesha is mostly spotted alone in school, wandering about with no friends. Since, she is often alone and quiet, her teachers find it difficult to ‘figure her out’. She becomes problematic for them because they seem to have no clue about how to get through to her. Given her apparent alienation in school, she is an easy target for bullying. Most of the bullying Eesha endures goes unnoticed and unreported as there is no one to confide in. During the interview, she reported that the nature of the remarks and jokes cracked on her were mostly linked to *aukad*(status). Her peer group inferred her ‘status’ on the basis of characteristics like: her physical appearance (Eesha has dark, caramel skin and sports oiled, plated hair), language (greater use of Hindi and Marathi and very little to no English) and parents occupation. Over the years, the severity of bullying increased and began to grasp the attention of the class teacher, the school councillor. Eesha’s parents, though aware of the bullying always advised

her to ignore it 'until it is bearable'. However, standard six has been hard upon Eesha and she seemed to have reached her tipping point. She cried more often and fighting with those who bullied her, thus attracting teacher's attention.

When Eesha confided in her father about the severity of the situation, he broke into tears before Eesha. He said

'We have gone beyond our means to get Eesha admitted in the top school of our locality, hoping to get her a good education, so that she earns a respectable name for herself and us in the future. But because of us, our daughter is going through hell. Treating each other with 'respect' is something they do not teach in schools. It comes from the family. Some of the students belong to such families which will never accept us as one of them.'

One may note, the insult Eesha's parents and Eesha feel is associated to the inference of others based on their social status. Their social status (related to the jobs they do, kind of habitus they possess) has been made a topic of contention and concern to the extent that their daughter faces ostracization within her peer group. One notices a delicate blend of caste-based socio-biographical history and present socio-economic class location. The implicitness of caste and its association with occupation and culture and its impacts on individuals in the form of self-doubt, self-respect, self-confidence among many others is evident in Eesha's experiences. Eesha's parents cannot help but notice the uncanny similarities between usage of innuendos like '*dirty, uncultured, not-respectable*' which have been used in the past to describe the so-called lower castes (by the so called high born pure castes) and similar insults hurled at their daughter in school. Though caste is not identified as a defining reality by teachers or students, it plays pivotal part in cultivating prominent social realities, ideas and trends in modern liberal schools of urban India and in the ghettoisation of the mind, which enables a cognitive perpetuation of othering based on the subtle understanding and operationalisation of caste.

NATIONALISM

This section looks at interaction processes in schools associated with 'Indianness' in particular and nationalism in general. The idea being, to understand 'self-negotiation' of students by identifying themselves as part of a group (as Indians) and to understand the manner in which classroom encounters take place to encourage or discourage the same. For the purpose of this paper, nationalism has been treated as a pertinent issue materialising in the everyday experiences of students, observed from the point of view of their understanding of 'Indianness' itself and not solely handed down to them. In this process of evolving and understanding Indianness, it becomes interesting to observe how students associate certain characteristics and dissociate certain others.

Belonging to a certain nation is an essential part of group identity of

individuals. It provides them a sense of belonging to a historically evolved, stable social, political, cultural and territorial entity. Naturally, it is essential to students' socialisation as well and is likely to contribute significantly to their idea of 'self'. Therefore, their understanding of who qualifies as Indian, who does not, what it means to be an Indian etc is paramount in carving their own 'self image'. This becomes especially relevant in the present times where national identity and pride associated with the same is being imposed in a hyper masculine, manifest and violent manner. Students make their interpretation of 'nationalism'¹⁰ from the content they view on media, from discussions witnessed among elders at home and peer groups. Schools too emphasise on the significance of one's national identity through morning assemblies, graffiti, curriculum of subjects like Civics, History, Hindi and Marathi. Additionally, being a good Indian (often equated to being a good person), seeking an employment functional to one's nation and subsequently making the nation proud (*naam roshankarna*) is one of the popular reasons why one must educate oneself and one's children. It was observed that students of both schools attached high priority to being a good Indian and it seems to be ingrained in their habitus. Schools seek to build upon this habitus, creating ideals of citizenship and normalising a certain model (limit) of nationalism. 'Good citizenship education has been characterised as the 'test' of effective schooling (Hennessey 2006:198). Hence, an essential part of formal schooling is the process of learning and unlearning moral values in the pursuit of becoming an ideal citizen. It is quite often seen as a precedent to becoming a good and successful person.

A certain factor that students seemed to associate with being Indian was religion. It was figuring as a characteristic pre-requisite to being or not being a good Indian and students blended religious affiliations with one's fidelity for country. This is supplemented by current socio-political climate which links chest-thumping, hyper-masculine Hindutva to being Indian. It only made sense therefore to enquire into this supposed association between nationalism and religion and its subsequent impact on student's 'self'.

Incidentally the field work at school A was conducted at the same time as debates on CAA-NRC raged across the country. While no formal or official discussion about it was conducted at school, the same could not be said for the households of students. Students often came to class laden with information they had gathered at home. They often discussed notions of *Azaadi*, *protest*, *student-terrorists* etc. On one occasion, in the absence of a teacher certain students began discussing the 'tension' being caused due to ongoing protests, across the country. All students got attracted to the discussion and began participating in it. They felt that *Islamists and Pakis* (their understanding of the participants of protests) had infiltrated India and were eager to break the nation into fragments (*tukde-tukde*). *Islamists and Pakis* were men in long beards and skull caps and women with dark kahal in black salwar-kameez, head covered

or in *hijabs*. In between the discussion, some boys turn to a fellow classmate, Faiz and ask him

Does your father also have such a beard (pointing to their chin). You must know !

Faiz laughed a little at their joke and then excused himself to go to the toilet, embarrassed at being identified as belonging to a group of people who were supposedly trying to break up the nation. After returning from the washroom, Faiz lingered near the windows and did not show interest in the discussion. As the discussion fizzled out Faiz came back to his seat. The discussion was symbolic of the fact that students were actively engaging in interactions and experiences happening outside their schools and this was actively shaping their views, beliefs and ideas. According to them, their nation, which is of paramount significance, was in danger because of certain 'anti-nationals'. These anti-nationals were understood as being 'Muslims', who they call *Islamis*. Further into the discussion, students were confused about the distinction between being a *Muslim* and being a *Pakistani*. They, however were sure that Pakistanis were the ultimate enemies of Indians and all Pakistanis too were Muslims, just like 'anti-nationals', hence they must be hated. A lot of this was said with complete disregard for their two Muslim classmates, both of who happened to be fairly popular boys of the class: Mohd Faiz and Mohd. Ihsaan. While Ihsaan seemed relatively unfazed by the discussion, Faiz became restless. As the bell rang for the lunch break, all the boys, including Faiz, ran outside the class to play, as if the discussion had never happened. However, Faiz's consciousness of his being is heightened. He remains stoic and guarded for the rest of the day. Later in the week a primary questionnaire is handed out to students as part of the research. Faiz was the only one out of thirty students, to mention his religious affiliation when asked to write about himself. '*I am Muslim*', he writes. It was observed that Faiz seldom felt ease in discussing his religion in class given the underlying environment where Muslimness was being associated with 'anti-nationalism'. He rarely feels confident of himself in class and hence shadows his best friend Mohd Ihsaan. Ihsaan, whose name is often confused as Ishaan, is the class topper, the best football player in junior school and very well behaved with teachers. He presents himself with confidence and ease. Ihsaan's presence in class is significant to Faiz as he depends heavily on him. Ihsaan helps him with academics, eases his interaction in class and acts as his buffer against confrontations and discomforts.

Faiz's story outlines a very real and often ignored predicament of students belonging to religious minorities; especially one which is facing social persecution at the hands of the majority. Even though he attends a school that offers secular education, he conducts himself in a fashion which at best may be described as secular and liberal, he is unable to escape humiliation based on his religious identity and the extrapolated connection between one's religion

and love for one's nation. That the humiliation is often wrapped in humour normalises this act of subtle marginalisation. Add to this the insensitivity of the schools in being blissfully unaware of such discourses among students or turning a blind eye to the same or doing little or nothing to deal with students of religious minorities, specifically now, when it is needed more than ever. Faiz negotiates within him 'self' so as to deal with situations as such. One of his best bets is hanging in the shadows of his best friend (significant other) Ihsaan and maintaining a low profile in general. Since Ihsaan is more popular and more liked than him, this is an effective tactic of diverting attention from himself.

CONCLUSION

1. Schools and classrooms emerge as significant spaces where ideas related to self-concept are negotiated. Students actively borrow from everyday exchanges, engage in new ones; adding and subtracting from their 'self'. While at it, students display a sense of reflexivity¹¹. They do not imbibe just anything and everything that is happening out here. Meaningful opinions made by significant others and generalised others are taken into account. They run it through a systematic understanding of what they already know, what they have learnt and have been taught; a scheme of deeply ingrained traits, habits and knowledge: habitus¹².
2. Classrooms are not insulated from the outside world. The actions, interactions, gestures, conversations experiences within classrooms derive value from all that transpires outside classrooms. This might range from what has been experienced while at practise match of football in the school ground, conversations with parents and other relatives at home, interactions with play mates in residential buildings, exposure to social media, news, cinema etc. The overt act of schooling which is predominantly believed to include teaching, learning, excelling in schools is actually played out on the canvas of such interactions which have very little to with schooling as we know it.
3. To say that classrooms, schools are meant for academic ends and that leaning/teaching is at the centre of schooling then becomes a misplaced notion. Students are very covertly being socialised and initiated into becoming citizens of a world that has set aside pre-decided roles (status and power which accompanies it), rules and regulations for them. Since, this paper operationalises the symbolic interactionist paradigm on field, it provides the reader with the advantage of viewing this process up close. When an individual is observed while operating in their respective social ecology, it helps understand the social from the point of view of the individual. It is like looking at social reality 'bottom-up'. It is then that we get to see how severe (or not) is the seepage of meta realities

with respect to their impact on everyday here and now lived realities. In case of school going students of a certain age, it is evident that their perceptions and prejudices are grounded in varied experiences from their social worlds and is impacting their (and others) notion of self, either in terms of number of friends they make, how they fare in academics etc.

Notes

1. Self is a concept coined and used extensively in Social-Psychological literature. Cooley proposed a theory of Looking Glass Self in 1902, stating that a person's self grows out of interpersonal interactions and perceptions of others. G.H Mead later carries this concept further by stating that social experiences shape one's self. Self turned out to be Mead central concept. It is part of an individual's personality composed of self-awareness and self-image. Mead claimed that the self is not there at birth; rather, it is developed with social experience.
2. In spiritual and Philosophical texts 'self' is treated differently from its sociological usage. Descartes, Locke, Hume, Tagore, Gandhi, Aurobindo have written about a rather philosophical notion of self wherein an individual becomes conscious of their separateness from the world. It has often been treated as a unit distinct from the physical body, similar to the notion of soul. It often refers to consciousness of one's being. In this paper, 'self' is used as a concept only of the sociological tradition of social-psychology.
3. Some of these works are Social-Class Variations in the Teacher-Pupil Relationship by H.S Becker, Social Relations in a Secondary School by D.H.Hargreaves, The Logic of Non Standard English by William Labov, Through the Looking Glass: Gender Socialisation in a Primary School, Nandini Bhattacharjee, Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India, Meenakshi Thapan
4. Meaningful interactions: Mead postulates that any act becomes socially meaningful when it is done with an intention which is recognised and reciprocated by the opposite party. Hence, all parties engaging in interaction must be aware of standard rules of game which define standard meanings for interpretation thereby giving image of consensus amongst the collective social.
5. Labelling as used by H.S Becker's work Outsiders; studies in the sociology of Deviance (1963).
6. I and Me has been used by Mead to describe the reflexive process of development of self in individuals. The terms refer to the psychology of the individual, where in Mead's understanding, the "me" is the socialized aspect of the person, and the "I" is the active aspect of the person.
7. Significant other is a social psychological concept. They are those entities that have a formative role in shaping personalities and identities of others.
8. New Middle Class: term used and theorized heavily by Leela Fernandes in the book India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform. It provides a fresh narrative on growth of middle class, maneuvering social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital towards gainful ends; amidst complex politics of caste, gender and religion.
9. Self Respect Movement: a social movement of the 1920s where traditional lower

castes demanded equality not only in material aspects but in aspects like honour, pride, self-respect and rights. Authors like Saraswathi S in her book *Towards Self respect* and Arora and Awasthi in *Political Theory and Political Thought* give a nuanced analysis of the same.

10. Leading dailies and political magazines like *The New Yorker*, *The Diplomat*, *The Hindu* among others have reported an apparent rise in cases related to an upsurge in nationalism and violent jingoistic stirs associated with the same.
11. Mead believes that the 'self' is reflexive in nature. That is, it is an object to itself. It has the ability to look back at itself in the process of negotiation. Mead's understanding of reflexivity is different from that of Bourdieu's or Giddens.

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