

# Ideal child in the ideal nation: Gender, class and work in a school lesson.

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## Resumen/ Abstract

The influence of schooling on shaping childhood identity is a relatively under-researched area, especially within the Indian context. Although it is acknowledged that schools form significant sites of secondary socialisation, they tended to be treated as 'black boxes', leaving little scope for ethnographic and other inquiry into school processes which form a critical part of the lifeworld of the school child. These processes are distinguished by social markers like gender, class, caste, religion and location, which make the study of identity formation in childhood through schooling complex and challenging.

Textbooks play a crucial role in school socialisation. Embodying a selection of knowledge deemed to be worthy of teaching and learning, or what some refer to as 'official' knowledge, textbooks frame and normativise notions of childhood, citizenship and nation within the institutional space of the school. Socialisation into citizenship through textbook knowledge involves explicit and implicit references to the duties and responsibilities of the child as citizen to the modern nation state.

This paper attempts to ethnographically capture the process of socialisation of children into the ideal of labour in the modern nation, through examination of one lesson in a textbook for Grade 4, and its transaction in a classroom in an urban government primary school in a city in Gujarat, India. Textual analysis, classroom observations and interviews with children and teachers were used in a larger study of which this paper is a part.

The text and classroom discussion discursively produce the nation and the importance of 'kadi mehnat' to its progress, through the elaboration of different areas of work and labour and their significance to the project of the modernising nation-state. The manner in which textbooks function to socialise children into normative notions of work in the nation are highly gendered and distinctly marked by class, as well as caste and urban/rural location. The ideal child of the ideal nation is discursively produced through narratives of valour, discipline and dedication. Gender pervades the discourse of the ideal nation, with women represented as key agents in its moral reproduction. Children from poor communities take part in the ritual performance of classroom participation, in which subjectivity and the real conditions of their lives find no place, and knowing that structural realities will not allow for the realisation of these ideals.

This paper problematises the assumptions underlying the pedagogical aims of official school knowledge and shows how these are profoundly gendered. It argues for incorporation of insights from school ethnographies that examine constructions of the normative learner/subject from a gender perspective into the sociology of contemporary Indian childhood.

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**Palabras clave / Keywords:** textbook, gender, labour

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## **Ideal child in the ideal nation:**

### **Gender, class and work in a school lesson**

*The formation of identity is a highly complex process which cannot be assumed to be successful at either the conscious or unconscious levels of learning. What we need is an analysis not just of the production and transmission of cultural messages but also [their] reception before we can judge their forms.*

(Macdonald:1980:34)

It is widely acknowledged that schooling plays a critical role in shaping childhood identity. The school is the first formal social institution the child is exposed to and constitutes the most important site of socialisation into the norms, values and ideologies of citizenship in the modern nation state. Textbooks, embodying what some scholars have referred to as 'official knowledge', are the principal vehicle for the transmission of these ideologies, reflecting the 'distribution of power and the principles of social control' in society (Bernstein,1971, p.47). In doing so, textbook knowledge also frames and normativises ideas of childhood, through the linking of the ideals of children's education to the ideals of national development. This is achieved more explicitly through the selection of content in textbooks, but also through style, genre and form. The hidden curriculum -- everyday practices within school settings such as rituals and routines of various kinds -- articulate and strengthen these ideals at an embodied level.

This paper attempts to ethnographically explore these processes through an analysis of one lesson in a Class 4 textbook and classroom discussion around this lesson. The paper draws on data from ethnographic fieldwork spread over a year in a government primary school in a city in western India. The lesson, titled *Kaun Kya Banega* (Who will become what?), addresses the range of occupations available to children when they enter the world of adulthood. It exemplifies the complex ways in which gender, class and nation interweave in dominant constructions of what constitutes 'work', and helps us to understand the significance of these constructions to the lifeworlds of children.

### **The children**

Government-run schools in Indian cities are typically attended by children from poor and working class backgrounds. The children in the study were between the ages of 9 to 11 years. They were from urban migrant communities, and were first- or second generation school-goers. Such communities in urban India have certain characteristics which are important to consider while attempting to understand the lives of children. Firstly, as workers in the unorganised sector, they are central to the urban economy. There is a continuation of caste-based occupations within this sector -- by and large, fathers of the children in the study were employed in certain caste-based occupations such as carpentry,



tile-polishing, vegetable-vending, etc. Secondly, cultural knowledge of native villages are kept alive within the community through short visits, as well as interaction with family elders and other relatives who lived with the families. Linkages are also maintained through living in neighbourhoods organised around caste, community and region of origin. The children in the study, especially boys, had a keen understanding of the harsh economic conditions of the village which forced their families to migrate to the city. Many of them worked as helpers to their fathers or earned meagre daily wages in other petty occupations. Although another major characteristic of these communities was their aspiration for education of their sons whom they viewed as being able, through a school degree, to obtain a regular job in the city, these boys, by their own admission, were compelled to work in order to supplement family income. For the children, then, shifting to the city, whatever its other important effects, did not mean a rupture of the social order of caste and community. Caste, class and gender are re-articulated within the urban setting.

### **Children, work and labour**

Ethnographic interviews with the children revealed the significant position of 'work' in the structuring - and gendering- of their lives. Work, as physical labour, was seen to be related to symbolic constructions of gender, and also of the lived realities of caste. Work was a dominant motif in the social experiences of children at home, with girls clearly being put through a tutoring in domestic and childrearing skills (although boys were also expected to know the rudiments of cooking and were entrusted with chores outside the home).

Scholars of childhood, particularly in developing societies, make a distinction between the work and the labour of children (see Leiten, 2004). Work is seen as related to socialisation and labour to wage-earning and as such antagonistic to normative development such as that offered by formal education. The narratives of the children of this study, however, involved a blurring of these lines. They saw their work as critical to the survival of the family and household. Resonating with dominant forms of gender asymmetry, dualisms ascribed to gender were a consistent feature of children's experiences of work. Distinctions between the 'private' and 'public', differential value attached to paid as against unpaid work and manual and non-manual tasks were seen to be constitutive of the children's very notion of 'work'. These distinctions were played out in the school within the complex matrix of gender constructions within specific social- interactional contexts. Thus, in brief, girls were assigned tasks which cast them as being dependable and pliable to teachers' authority, boys were given those tasks which demanded strength and the self-confidence to leave the boundaries of the school building.

A central assumption underlying discourses of formal school education in India is that the school child is one who is free, unburdened, in need of supervisory protection and care and, most importantly, capable of giving wholehearted attention to school learning. Drawing on conceptions distinctly rooted in post- industrial societies, in India this ideal child learner emerges as typically middle class, urban and male, since the lived realities of all other categories of children in Indian society are far from fitting this norm. The normativising of a



notion of childhood in discourses of education in postcolonial India involves the denial of such children's experiences and their absence from knowledge presented to learners.

There is a relationship between the unresolved conflict between childhood and work, and its expressions in everyday discursive practices within schools. The *curricular context* can be seen as a critical 'moment' within the child's everyday engagement with the world of school knowledge. Formed out of a totality of obvious and subtle interactions in the process of learning in the classroom, it represents the most challenging moment to explore the ways in which official, 'prescribed' knowledge embodied in textbooks used in all schools find their true ideological significance in their rendering within the specific social space of a classroom. This is a 'known' space, inhabited by children (and teachers) whose social worlds and individual subjectivities are familiar to the ethnographic researcher. The paper will attempt to flesh out one curricular context framed by the lesson *Kaun Kya Banega*.

### ***Kaun kya banega: Gender and the hidden curriculum of 'work'***

'Work' is a multi-layered category in school discourse. Several meanings were attached to the idea of work. The 'official knowledge' of work was that which was 'expected' of social actors in the school setting. There was the work of teachers: teaching, completing the syllabus, correcting books and examination papers; and administrative work. Monitors' work was minding the children, helping the teacher, and teaching. The work of the children was to behave decorously, read and write well, study and attempt to pass in all subjects.

However there were also more 'hidden' meanings to work. Teachers were expected to instil 'manners' and 'discipline' in the children, and the children were expected to do '*kadi mehnat*' (hard work) to achieve success. Male teachers did different work from female teachers; girl monitors were assigned work of one kind and boy monitors of another. Fathers were asked to come to collect and sign report cards; if they 'didn't have the time' mothers could come. Unpaid work of mothers—'housework'—was not regarded as 'productive' work. The children in their interviews all had difficulty with the question 'what work does your mother do?', leading to answers like : Nothing, she just sits – *baithi rahti hai*.

Another layer of complexity to the idea of 'work' is more directly within the terrain of gender and formal education. While education for women is of crucial significance to their development and self-realisation, the perception of education as a lever to paid work outside the home is a largely middle-class conception. All the women teachers in the school took to financial employment to supplement family incomes, but by virtue of their higher class and caste positions, they possessed a degree of cultural capital which the children did not possess. When women teachers assume that a child with financial difficulties will be in a better position if her mother works outside the home, they clearly mean well, but do not realise that they are speaking from a position of relative privilege.



In teachers' interactions with children such assumptions of 'gender equality' would co-exist quite unproblematically with other, regressive, notions about gender. As an illustrative example, I will describe one episode which involved Tara, a 10 year old Nepali girl, who was doing rather badly in all examinations that year. Two teachers were discussing her 'case' during a games session on the playground.

Teacher: Tara doesn't do well in studies. I told her mother why don't you get out of the house. She doesn't want to. Husband died three years back,[she] lives off her husband's pension. *I told her see, we are women and we work outside.* But she doesn't want to.

[calls out to Tara] Why don't you study? We'll tell your *mamaji* (maternal uncle) to get you married and send you to a Nepali village.

Tara's brother, who studied in the same class, told me that although the teachers told them that they should tell their mother to work, there was 'no use'. I asked him why. He said '*Angoota chaap ko kaun kam dega?*' (Who will give an illiterate work?)

The official curriculum repeatedly stressed that work should be aimed towards selfless service, such as working for the community and the nation. Working for economic gain was not acceptable to normative discourse within the formal education setting. As mentioned before, the normative school child is not expected to be an economic agent. Postcolonial discourse on education in India hinges on a certain pedagogic 'modernism' that forecloses discussions of labour on the part of children. Yet many of the children in this school *had* to work to supplement family incomes. Here there was a contradiction between the official and the hidden meanings of 'work' in the school context.

Labour can thus be legitimately addressed within official curriculum by placing it within the context of adult occupations. Official rhetoric of formal education as a guarantor of upward social and economic mobility can be convincingly marshalled in such a context, through emphasis on the value of *kadi mehnat* (intensive efforts/hard labour) in achieving goals. The playing out of dominant beliefs about individual efforts to become somebody in a modernising society are displayed in the Hindi language lesson evocatively titled '*Kaun kya banega?*' (Who will become what?). The story embodies dynamics of gender and social class; moreover, within the curricular context, the underlying narratives of gender were brought to the surface in a dramatic manner.

### Learning to Labour

*Kaun kya banega* is a story set in a classroom, where the male teacher (*Guruji*) is narrating the children about the achievements and good deeds of '*mahapurushon*' or great men of the country –scientists, scholars and leaders – and their contribution to the nation's development. In the lesson, the *guruji* asks the children what they will be when they grow up. The selection of occupations is interesting because it represents those areas of labour



essential to the modernization project– the doctor, the engineer, the teacher, the soldier, the leader and the ‘good’ farmer, who adopts modern agricultural technologies too increase yields. It is pictorially presented as a masquerade, much like a school fancy dress competition, where children dressed as adults play out five of the six characters in the story. The sixth, the farmer, is represented in the more traditional textbook iconography of a man ploughing a field. All characters, are male, except the one who says she wants to be a teacher (named, predictably, Saraswati, or the Hindu goddess of learning). Four boys are Hindu, and one is Muslim.

There is a distinct naturalisation of gender in adult occupations. However, these need to be seen in conjunction with other aspects of the story. Firstly, the illustrations accompanying the text portray all characters as distinctly belonging to the urban middle-class, except the farmer. All adult occupations are shown as being linked to the idea of ‘national progress’. Finally, the *Guruji’s* closing remarks are significant and elucidate the moral agenda of the lesson : ‘Those who do *kadi mehnat* (hard work), achieve success; you will all definitely be successful if you work hard’.

The greatness of the nation is represented by the hard work, sacrifice and nobility of the *mahapurush* – a trope in the school textbooks that is deeply etched by gender and caste. The ideal of the *mahapurush* is associated with the value of hard work and effort – ‘*kadi mehnat*’- which brings about national progress and pride. *Kadi mehnat* becomes part of the national imagination. It defines citizenship through the selfless service and toil of common people.

It is interesting to see in this lesson how the idea of the nation can be mapped on to the labour of its citizens, and how textbook are fundamentally constituted by ideologies of gender, as much by caste and class. Let us look at the gendered idea of nation in the lesson. All the occupations are cast as essential to the maintenance and progress of the modernizing nation state. Productive and reproductive roles in the nation are clearly demarcated by gender. Boys are shown as aspiring to leadership and productive roles and gaining the approval of the teacher for this. The lone girl is clearly marked out as being a moral agent in the nation’s progress, as responsible for influencing ‘good citizenship’. Dominant gender ideologies pervade the lesson through the exclusion of women. The girl can never be any of the other national ‘workers’. She cannot be a leader, because she is not capable of ‘*tan-mandhan seva*’ ( service through body, mind and wealth) to the country’s progress. She is not part of the industrializing process, can also not inherit her father’s capital as an engineer; neither can she go to the village and open a clinic to serve the poor. The masculine heroism and bravery of the soldier also excludes her. She could have been an agricultural labourer, but could not have been shown participating in modernized green revolution farming technologies, and in any case an iconography would have to be invented to represent her! The *Guruji’s* remarks indicate that it is not through imparting knowledge which is what as a teacher she should be doing, but through socialization into *values* that she would contribute to the nation’s progress. In other words, it is in the moral reproduction of the national community that women find their national role. Success, for the girl, would entail working hard at creating citizens through inculcation of national values and norms. The natural and



national merge in the case of women's contribution to nation building, this is the limited public space she is permitted, which is an extension of her private, nurturing role within the household and family.

### **Structuring discourse: Classroom discussions of *Kaun Kya Banega***

'See, that's you (the teacher), that's your brother (engineer), that's your father(farmer).'

Seema, 10 (from fieldnotes<sup>1</sup>)

De-contextualisation of the idea of 'work' from the social worlds of these children was evident in the transaction of this particular lesson in the classroom. The implicit message of the lesson, underlining the dimensions of gender and social class to labour, are seen in the responses of social actors in the classroom. The structure of the lesson was such that it invited participation from students in the classroom, and the children greatly enjoyed discussing the lesson in class.

The lesson's underlying dynamic of gender was reinforced by the teacher's non-verbal communication patterns during its transaction in the classroom. As she read and explained the lesson, she addressed the boys.

See, Salim wants to be an engineer. Have to know Mathematics, English and Science well to become engineers...all teachers want their students to do well.

...See Pratap. He's not a coward, he wants to be a soldier...Those who are lazy, they only dream. What do we need to achieve [what we want]?

A girl: Work hard.

Teacher[continues]:If you don't work hard in the exams how will you pass? Teachers want their students to be good at studies...[She narrates the case of one of her former students who works in a bank.]...OK, now I'll ask you one by one what you want to be. Should we start with the girls, or the boys? Girls? OK? Say whatever you want, don't be scared. Nurse, even engineer. *Old views are gone. Nowadays girls can also work. They bring their fathers, later husbands, money...*(emphasis added).

The girls then took turns to state what they wanted to be. Apart from four who said 'doctor', and the three who said 'police', all the girls said 'teacher' or 'sister'(nurse). The boys likewise stated their ambitions: all said doctor, engineer, police (at which the teacher interrupted: Officer, no?). One boy said 'carpenter', at which the teacher turned around to me and remarked, disparagingly, 'That's his *home culture*'. One said 'farmer', and another

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<sup>1</sup> Manjrekar, N. 1999. Learning Gender in the Primary School: A Study of Curriculum, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, India.



'*sarkari afsar*' (government officer); the latter evoking a response from the teacher: Why? *Aaram hai, na, is liye?* (Because it is so comfortable?)

All the children were expected to provide rationales for their choice of future career: this appeared to be one way for them to learn the lesson. Although the teacher drew their attention to the gendered nature of the boys' responses, it was subsumed within the culture of gendered classroom discourse, which was competitive and oppositional.

Not one of the boys want to be teachers. How many of the girls want to be teachers...None from the boys?

Some of the boys the teacher had condemned to fail since the beginning of the year said they wanted to be a 'doctor' and an 'engineer'. The teacher's long commentary after hearing the children summed up the social possibilities she envisaged for them. It is cited here in full because of the subtext of social class and gender and their relation to the construction of the educational subject:

OK. Now pay attention here... Everyone has said what they want to be... But we have to work hard, decide with our minds that we want to work [hard]. See Jagdeep, Aman, Mohammed, they say they want to be doctors...but for doing that they'll have to work hard. I'm not saying they can't be. Anyone in the world can...but see these boys don't work...Aman, he's always absent but...says he wants to be a doctor. *With zeroes in the 4<sup>th</sup> can you be a doctor?* Whatever you want to be you have to start from now. If you want to be a soldier, build up strength, learn to face troubles...you shouldn't cry for small things...

[Faces girls] If you say you want to be a teacher, you have to learn properly, learn to speak in public... You have to have general knowledge, *be modest, compassionate*...if you want to teach illiterate people[as in the text] start teaching your illiterate mother at home...those who want to be nurses start looking after ill people at home, press feet, give water...

[Faces boys] For doctor, you have to start now, getting good marks, writing well, fast, in good handwriting...don't throw your books into the corner when you get home... There's a proverb that when a mother looks at her son, she knows what he'll be when he grows up...(emphasis added).

The teacher's rationale for addressing boys lay in her knowledge that the social investment in boys' education was higher for the parents of these children, and that girls were likely, however enthusiastic about education, to be married young and withdrawn from school. However, within the formal space of the classroom, official rhetoric of 'equality of opportunity through education' and gender equality were stances to be maintained. The contradictions inherent in this situation led to contexts where oppositional categories were normalised in everyday pedagogic encounters, with girls being stereotyped as 'manageable' and 'better at studies', and boys as 'unmanageable' and 'disinterested'. Significantly,



though, boys were clearly cast as the ‘subjects’ of formal education, through teachers paying greater attention to engaging them in didactic discourse about the value of ‘school success’. Such contradictions can be viewed as indicative of the dialectical relationship between poor children’s social worlds and their school experiences.

### **In conclusion**

Analysis of classroom interactions around this lesson revealed the overwhelmingly stereotyped responses of the children, which appeared to be patterned on the ‘logic’ of the lesson, a ritual performance empty of real engagement. What was this logic? Simply put, it revolved around the imagination of the strong nation as built by those who laboured for its progress, where women and men consensually performed their natural productive roles in the economy, strengthening their capabilities through hard work. Implicit to this understanding is a certain hierarchisation of work, based on gender, class and caste; as well as the emphasis on success in education as a precursor to achieving success in the ‘right’ occupations. This was dramatically brought out in the narrative of one boy, who told me that he would be forced to be a farmer, since he did not know how to read and write.

The ideal child of the ideal nation is discursively produced both in the lesson as well as through classroom discussion through narratives of valour, self sacrifice, discipline and dedication. Gender pervades the discourse of the ideal nation, with women represented as key agents in its moral reproduction. Children from poor communities took part in the ritual of classroom discussion around the lesson, knowing fully well that their subjective experiences were far removed from the representations in the lesson, and that their structural positions would in all likelihood not allow for the realisation of the ideals of labour portrayed in the lesson. Observations and ethnographic interviews of the children revealed that the participation of children in the discussions around *Kaun Kya Banega* was informed by the *facticity* of their social experiences and the *possibilities* the lesson offered for re-imagining their adult futures. To deny that at least some of these children will be able to fight social barriers to ‘achieve success’ in such occupations (however gender stereotyped and differentially valued they may be), or that teachers are cynical in their statements about ‘hard work to achieve success’ would be to deny the emancipatory potential that education holds out especially for the poor. The question that arises has more to do with the particular teleologies set into motion by the positioning of children as future productive agents in the national economy (where only the teacher and leader have a directly social role to play) in the ‘official’ curriculum, and the recontextualisation of these teleologies within the particular situated context of curriculum transaction where gender roles and divisions are distinctly established.

This paper attempts to ethnographically capture certain contradictions in the constructions of the ideal child learner within the specific context of an urban working class school in India. It attempts to problematise assumptions underlying the pedagogical aims of official school knowledge. With recent progressive measures in curriculum reform in India since the framing of the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF 2005) that gives primacy,



among other aspects, to the complex relationship of children, work and formal education, thick descriptions of curricular processes at the classroom level assume significance for alternate conceptualisations of curriculum that are sensitive to social exclusions and address issues of gender, class and caste. Insights from school ethnographies can enhance our understanding of how these identities are critical to the sociology of childhood within the modern nation state as well as guide alternate frameworks to address the challenges of more socially inclusive school curriculum and pedagogy.

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