

# Imagining Citizenship: Being Muslim, Becoming Citizens in Ahmedabad

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Against the background of the experience of extreme and brutal violence against the Muslim community in 2002, and the rapid process of ghettoisation along religious divides in Ahmedabad, this study, based on the fieldwork in selected schools in the Muslim-dominated areas, focuses on understanding how secondary schools run by Muslim trusts seek to recover and establish identities of being Muslim through their pursuit of citizenship ideals.

The fieldwork in selected schools in Ahmedabad was conducted in October–November 2008. I am indebted to Mayuri Samant in the collection of data and to Achyut Yagnik, Suchitra Sheth, Cedric Prakash, and others for helping us gain an overall understanding as well as to school managements that allowed us to be present in their schools and engage with their students and teachers. I am very grateful to Sudarshan Iyengar for his continuing support in Ahmedabad. This article is work-in-progress and is based primarily on the findings from the schools in which fieldwork was conducted. Additional fieldwork is essential before further analysis is undertaken in this area.

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## 1 Introduction

The focus of this article is on understanding how some selected schools for children from the Muslim community in Ahmedabad seek to recover and establish their identity through their pursuit of citizenship ideals. Such schools undoubtedly exist in an atmosphere of exclusion and marginalisation and seem to understand that in order to be accepted by the majority community, there would have to be a change in being Muslims in particular ways. Citizenship education is therefore constructed and articulated in the language of acceptance: to have good manners, express perfect behaviour, be neatly dressed, control emotions, especially anger, and be committed to religion but within the parameters set by the dominant community. In this manner, the more recently established schools have apparently internalised the civilising mission of the Hindu right in order to gain acceptability and integration with the dominant community. However, in older, well-established schools, there is a critique of the state and of the breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relations that has resulted in the prevalent ghettoisation in different residential pockets of Ahmedabad. In such schools, we may argue, therefore that the sense of being citizens rests more on prevailing ideas about “good” and “ideal” qualities that may be conservative but are not suggestive of succumbing to the dominant culture.

In remembering the horrific events of 2002 in Gujarat, we must acknowledge the efforts of a community to pick up pieces of their lives in pursuit of a future that seeks social acceptance and gainful employment, among other things. It is to the credit of members of this community that they have not given themselves up to victimhood and despair and abandoned

hope for the future. Repeatedly, the media in Ahmedabad reports the inability of Muslim students to gain admission to Hindu schools, about the lack of opportunity for employment, about the denial of entry to housing that is not divided along religion. Such forms of inequality are further exacerbated by poverty and poorer members of the community are completely excluded, from even the middle class Muslim housing societies that have mushroomed in the Muslim ghettos of Ahmedabad.

The process of ghettoisation in Ahmedabad has a long and tortuous history beginning with the first Hindu-Muslim riots of 1969 until the pogrom of 2002 in which more than 3,000 Muslims lost their lives. The anti-reservation agitations in 1981 and 1985 resulted in further riots which slowly gained a communal slant. Advani’s rath yatra in the 1990s added to the fear and lack of trust between communities and to this were added divisions along caste lines:

In 1985, only one high wall came up between a *Patidar* and a Muslim neighbourhood in the old city of Ahmedabad; by the end of 1990 the residents of almost all *dalit chawls* in the industrial areas had erected high walls around them (Sheth and Haeems 2006: 1709).

In 2002, there is a further divide emerging from fear and distrust. Rajdeep Sardesai records,

...a number of families from both communities moved out to “safer” areas, safety being defined by their desire to stay with their co-religionists. Invisible “borders” have been drawn with clear rules of engagement: members of either community will not cross into the other’s territory unless absolutely necessary (Sardesai 2008).

Political and fundamentalist forces, namely, the Hindu right, have largely been responsible for abetting this communal divide. Muslims, who had been until then living in mixed neighbourhoods with Hindus, moved out to Muslim-dominated areas. In 2002, in the most violent, brutal and ghastly attacks on the Muslims, there was complete break of trust and the process of ghettoisation, therefore, came full circle. In addition, there is the exclusion and ghettoisation of the dalit and other low caste communities which is perhaps overlooked in view of the severity of the

religious divides.<sup>1</sup> It is against this rather grim and distressing background that this study focuses on three secondary schools in Ahmedabad. In the following vignettes, an attempt is made to foreground the forces that shape the development of citizenship education in particular schools and the ways in which these are articulated and experienced by participants in schooling processes.

## 2 School A: Internalising the Rhetoric of 'Being' Muslim

School A, an English medium private school, is located in Danilimda which is adjacent to the Shah Alam area which is dominated by the minority Muslim community. However, in Danilimda, there are apartments named Ravindra Park, Sridevi Park which point to the fact that at one time there was a substantial Hindu population in the area. Due to the communal riots, since 1992, the Muslim population from other areas has started migrating into Shah Alam making it spread out to Danilimda which is an adjacent locality. The growing population of Muslims in this area led to the outmigration of the Hindus and finally Danilimda became a Muslim-dominated area. There is another dimension to this process of ghettoisation. Due to the anti-reservation riots of 1981-85, there was tension between upper caste Hindus and dalits and other lower castes in the area. Upper caste Hindus no longer wanted to stay among Muslims and other lower castes, so it was only upper caste Hindus who migrated out. As a result, the percentage of students belonging to the Muslim minority population has increased in School A.

Due to this process of ghettoisation, there are incidents of communal disturbances even today as a result of rivalries that stem from the celebration of religious festivals such as Diwali. There are other social problems including those related to the education of the community. This is evident from the recent controversy regarding the residents' demand for starting a municipal school as there is not a single municipal school in the area, and especially after 2002, Muslim children do not gain admission in other good schools in the city.<sup>2</sup> This was also reported by members of the management of different Muslim

schools and points to the urgent requirement for the school in the area as well as to the larger question of the condition of education for the children of the minority community. Against this background, the principal aim of the management of this school is to improve the existing condition of education for Muslim children.

The president of the trust is a wealthy businessman in the construction business. At the time of 2002 riots, he claims that, he (with the help of a few friends) established the Shah Alam relief camp. At that time, the trust did not exist. It was at the suggestion of his friends and his own initiative and with a little help from the government, they started a charitable trust in his father's name. One of the major aims of the trust that runs this school since 2004 is to improve the educational condition of the children of a minority population. They found that the minorities are backward and vulnerable, especially in terms of education. The only municipal school, where mostly Muslim children study, is in very poor condition, as there are 150 children in one class, and there are no toilets or any other facilities such as furniture, or other infrastructure. We find that on the one hand, a Muslim businessman (the president of the trust) has an image of being involved in philanthropic work through the establishment of this school and doing other charitable work including organising and holding health camps for the poor. On the other hand, a negative image prevails, for example, people representing Hindu communal forces like the Bajrang Dal believe that the trust is trying to introduce the "Pakistani" system of education through various practices such as having half-day school on Fridays and also having a vacation for Ramazan.<sup>3</sup> There is complete lack of trust among both communities and an inability on the part of Hindu right wing groups to empathise with and seek to change the situation for young Muslim children who need to, and want to, be in school.

The school under study is affiliated to the Gujarat Education Board and mainly uses the textbooks of the Gujarat Board. They have also received a yearly calendar from the Gujarat Education Board which the school is obliged to follow. Apart from the holiday schedule, which does not include

a schedule for Ramazan, it is not clear to what extent this calendar was being observed in this school. The culture of discipline is not just limited to the students and the teachers also adhere to a strict dress code. The Hindu teachers wear a dupatta and the male teachers have a uniform as well. It is mandatory for all Muslim female teachers to wear burkhas. They cover their heads with a scarf and wear a long skirt which covers the whole body but their faces are open and they have lively countenances, and communicate easily with both male and female children.

The teachers are indistinguishable on the basis of religion except through their names (mostly Muslim) and all (both men and women) are well-qualified (with post-graduate degrees, some with diplomas in education), rather young, amiable, gentle, with a very easy manner of relating to children. Even while scolding children on the sports ground for being out of line or improperly dressed, there was an ease and gentleness in their manner towards children.

The identity of being a Muslim school is distinctly presented when the administrator of the school says: "it is perhaps the only school in Hindustan that gives vacation for Ramazan". Certain "rules" of discipline vis-a-vis religious practice are drawn from the religion, and at the same time, there is an attempt to overcome an uneasiness attached to certain aspects of this religious identity through an exaggerated emphasis on developing "good manners". In other words, embodied forms of discipline implicated in the teachers' uniform are certainly drawn from the Muslim identity which also tend to show an assertion made in terms of being Muslim. At the same time, the overall philosophy that emphasises "good manners" is rooted in an attempt to overcome this identity characterised by the popular construction of Muslims as barbaric and aggressive. This simultaneous assertion of identity and turning away from how the community is commonly perceived reflects the complexities and conflicts at the heart of the Muslims' experience of identity in ghettoised Ahmedabad: independent and fearless, conservative and loyal to religious discourse, rejecting aspects of identity that emphasise aggression and barbarism. The internalisation of these ideals that

are sought to be pursued by school management and teachers is, however, in question as students are not passive recipients of citizenship education and always seek to modify it according to their understandings, depending on social class, family and community and peer group cultures.<sup>4</sup>

The principal of the school (a professionally well-qualified woman) expressed the need and the importance of inculcating the values that express good behaviour, discipline and good manners in Muslim children. She told us that in this school, there are children from different economic backgrounds and this is possible in Islam, i.e., for students from different socio-economic backgrounds to study together in the same institution. She said, being a converted Muslim from Hinduism, she has experienced both the religions and “seen the separatism in Hindu religion which is certainly not here”. One of the major aims of the school is “brotherhood” she said, and added, “though Islam teaches brotherhood, Muslims are very aggressive” and that “they are very emotional”. On the other hand, she told us, “Hindus think and work”. However, after receiving education, Muslims are being “awakened” and education is therefore very important. One of her aims is to give education to this community and teach them to think and work and develop what she called “sophisticated personalities”.

The principal further emphasised that the popular construct of Muslims is that of being more aggressive and barbaric than the Hindu community and added that Muslims tend to be ‘emotional’ in nature. They do not ‘think’ before acting; so they should learn to think. This effort to develop and nurture conduct suggests her acceptance of the popular view that Muslims are overly aggressive and prone to emotional outbursts and is in consonance with the views of the dominant community. The emphasis by the school management on discipline, good manners and good behaviour can be understood as an attempt to address what the school management considers popular constructions of Muslims in society. Such values (which are an aspect of character education) are reinforced in the school through various formal and informal schooling processes and practices at different sites. In the morning assembly,

for example, after the singing of prayers and some *nazams* (which the children may have learned in madaras), children are told various stories about “good” behaviour. There is always a moral in the story which is carefully explained to the students. The content of the different songs sung during assembly, including the *nazams*, range from general ideas regarding showing respect to the god or thanking god for giving us this life, to themes such as equality, saying no to hatred among people, etc. There is also a session on general knowledge everyday. Along with current affairs, students also learn various facts and topical issues pertaining to history, science and geography.

Apart from all the important aspects of the assembly in this school, it also seeks to transact the culture of discipline. Through various activities such as two periods of drill every week, and constant instructions to maintain discipline by the principal as well as the appointment of volunteers to monitor whether or not students are wearing the correct uniform, this culture of discipline is seen as being inculcated among the students. This may seem similar to the efforts at character building and disciplining the body that is characteristic of most schooling processes, especially through the systematic playing out of the morning assembly which is the representative of the school’s coming together as a community.<sup>5</sup> They take on a more significant symbolic value, however, in view of the school management’s emphasis on character education as a citizenship ideal in a particular context.

The principal also continuously seeks to redress students’ behaviour through her meetings with parents and does not apparently distinguish between students and we observed that a trustee’s daughter was meted out the same punishment as other children. There is a lack of emphasis on discipline, as a corporeal entity, to be used to beat students into submission but through constant commands, coaxing and talking to students and to parents, to ensure compliance in the behavioural domain. In addition, her views on the need to make Muslims “sophisticated personalities” is suggestive of the urgency and force with which she seeks to bring about a lasting change in the children’s overall behaviour

patterns, and thereby, to construct and shape their identities as Muslims. These sophisticated personalities are the model citizens to partake of social and cultural life in contemporary India. In supporting and furthering this viewpoint, and seeking to implement it as a pertinent goal in the school, the principal has constructed citizenship ideals that sustain the views of the majority community.

### 3 School B: Nationalism in the Organisation of School Life

School B, a private unaided English medium school, is located in another so-called ghetto, a thickly Muslim-dominated area called Juhapura. Juhapura is considered the largest Muslim ghetto in the country with a population of two lakh people. Local activists of non-governmental organisations tell us that this area is often referred to as “mini-Pakistan” by the Hindu population in the city. Earlier it was not a part of the city, but since the last two years it has been incorporated in the city of Ahmedabad. Because of the process of communal ghettoisation in Ahmedabad, many Muslim parents started shifting their wards to schools in Juhapura thereby creating a need for good English medium schools in the area. This is one such school to which a large chunk of 150 students transferred in 2002 from another school in Vejalpur area which is a Hindu-dominated area. Juhapura appears to be a lower class area with poor civic amenities due to the lack of attention of the government to the civic problems.<sup>6</sup>

The school is located on the second floor of one building of a shopping complex which is over-run with small shops. The school space is rather small with hardly five to six rooms, and it therefore, functions in two shifts. In the morning there is a secondary section and the primary section is held in the afternoon. The school started in 1989 and there are 600 students in the school, among whom 250 are girls. Since it is a non-aided school, the monthly fee of the school is Rs 300 – with Rs 350 as the term fee. Evidently, the students belong to the weaker sections of society.

There is no explicit presence of a Muslim culture in the school except for the fact that the school has vacation for Ramazan like other Muslim schools. School discipline

seems to be the most important factor to the extent that there are even “prescribed” modes of communication in the school. For instance, a permanent notice board at the entrance to the school displays clear instructions regarding the mode of communication between the teachers and the parents. The board also contains information such as timings to meet the principal, specific timings to fill up the fees and strict instructions for the parents to send their wards regularly to the school attired in the proper uniform. It clearly states that the parents are not allowed to meet the class teachers without the permission of the principal. Such a display points to an explicit culture of discipline in the school. It came up from the discussion with the principal that even students are not allowed to interact with their respective class teachers without the prior permission of the principal-in charge. The principal-in charge appeared to be a strict disciplinarian and in his perception, the primary goal of school organisation is to teach discipline, good manners, which include speaking in English, good behaviour such as respect for elders, etc. The principal also seemed to be quite aware of the low socio-economic background of the students coming to the school, and in that particular context, emphasised the necessity of values such as discipline and good manners. Unlike the principal of School A who underlined the need to reconstruct Muslim identity, in School B, the emphasis is on the lower socio-economic background of the students and the need to educate and civilise the poor Muslim.

In School B, the “moral” space of the morning assembly has been replaced by the seamless display of photographs, messages from quotations written on the walls of the corridor and classrooms in the school. The entire territorial space of the school has been taken over for purposes of displaying the moral objectives of the school whatever form these may take. This includes sayings like “apple a day keeps doctor away”, “early to bed and early to rise makes the man healthy, wealthy and wise”, “Faith is force of life”, *Sang teo rang* (“you are known by the company you keep”), “Hatred is like a fire it makes even light rubbish deadly”, “Experience is the best teacher”, “Honesty is the best Policy”.

It would appear that character or civic education in this school is not geared to any particular religious or ethnic identity. At the same time, photographs of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, Rajendra Prasad, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi displayed on the corridor walls point to the nationalist framework of citizenship education prevalent in the school.

The formation of houses is one of the formal processes through which citizenship education takes place in this school. Houses point to the bearing of nationalist ideas on the teaching of citizenship education. All the houses in the school are named after heroes of the nation in different fields. It appears that the basic purpose is to familiarise students with these luminaries and to inculcate nationalist feelings in them. The great people after whom the houses are named are perceived as role models for the younger generation. Thus, houses are named after Shivaji, Tagore, C V Raman and Ashoka and we decided to find out what students in these houses think of them. Class 8 students in Shivaji House told us that Shivaji was a “great king” and that is why they have a house in his name. They think that he was great because he fought a lot of

wars. One of the boys said that he was not only brave, but he was also intelligent because he killed Aurangzeb cleverly. The boy did not believe that Aurangzeb was “bad” and said that all these kings were fighting with each other and war is destructive because many people get killed. But in spite of saying all this, he insisted that Shivaji was great.

Tagore House students emphasised that Tagore is an important figure because he wrote the national anthem. They said he also worked for people and society and the others who did this were Gandhi and Bhagat Singh. According to them, Gandhi was great because he practised satyagraha but they could not explain what satyagraha is. They did not know anything at all about Bhagat Singh. Ashoka House students said Ashoka was a great king. One of the boys said he spread Buddhism and non-violence, and added that, non-violence is a good value because then there will be no wars. He could not say anything about Buddhism. C V Raman House students stated that C V Raman is an important figure because he is an Indian scientist who received the Nobel Prize. One of the boys also said, “we also want to become like him”.

Gandhi was a clear first choice for alternative house names because he was a great

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freedom fighter, “there is no one like him” (*unke jaise koi nahi*), Mangal Pande was another favourite as in the students’ perception, he is the “first martyr” (*pehla shahid*), Chandrashekhar Azad was suggested as an alternative choice as one girl said, he was “brave as he told the British... you can never catch me”. Their lack of knowledge about the leaders after whom the houses are actually named indicates the students’ complete lack of affiliation or attachment to these figures who are distant from their everyday lives and have no place in them. This could be true of children in any school, and what stands out therefore is, the students’ choice of alternative figures which indicates the students’ willingness to support rebellious figures, who were ready to die for causes they deeply believed in, and so the spirit of sacrifice and of putting society before personal well-being is an important value for them. Clearly, students do not often imbibe what they are meant to either through textbooks or schooling practices. In School B, students subscribe to a citizenship ideal that celebrates the rebel, the martyr, and the hero without necessarily rejecting official prescriptions in toto. These students are in a sense “good” citizens as they accept the house names for what they are, leaders and great men, but desire for themselves a personal choice that valorises the brave and the radical.

It is striking that no houses are named after any Muslim national hero. The fact that Ashoka and Shivaji were chosen and no Muslim ruler, like Akbar, could be viewed as a mere coincidence. Perhaps, two possibilities may explain the choice of house names. Either this school also accepts the hegemony of the kind of citizenship education informed by majoritarian historical narratives, or the school authorities feel the pressure to present themselves as nationalist in terms of the prevalent hegemonic discourse. The physical location of the school might play a role in this construction. This is the hegemonic discourse that is prevalent in the city of Ahmedabad against which the school authorities might feel the need to present themselves as nationalists. While this school is not clearly articulating the need to change Muslim identity in a particular direction, or to make Muslim children apparently more wholesome,

less emotional and aggressive, it is undoubtedly indicating its preference for the projection of a Hindu nationalist ideology into the development of the child as a citizen of India.

#### 4 School C: Being Muslim, Becoming Citizens

School C, one of an old and established set of schools run by a trust for Muslim girls, follows a pattern of citizenship education that is based more on the understanding of civic education in its traditional sense. It is located near Jamalpur gate which is one of the Muslim-dominated areas in Ahmedabad. There are 1,700 girls in this school from eighth to 12th standard. It follows two mediums of instruction, Gujarati and Urdu. The girls wear *salwar kamiz* and dupatta which is most of the time worn over the head. The principal, known among friends as Jhansi ki Rani for her no-nonsense and efficient manner has been in the job for several decades. She appears to be an experienced head of the school, available to her staff and students who walk in and out of her room, has many visitors including Hindu educators who clearly respect her a great deal. She has a presence in the community and among educators of all hues in Ahmedabad.

The assembly every morning has a special meaning, she says, because it is very important to start the day with prayer “which is the culture of our country and so we tell our students, start your day by remembering god”. Assembly in this school, she tells us, is all about moral education and general knowledge. Moral education should focus on developing a civic sense in the students. This very simply includes being prudent in use of natural resources, and importantly, she emphasises “relationships among girls” as a significant component of this moral education. For instance, she says, according to Islam everyone has to give zakat that is extra income to the society. The school asks students to get their parents to give zakat to the school fund which is a student welfare fund. From this fund, the school buys books, uniform or anything else needed by poor students in the school. She argues that because of this effort on the part of the school, the girls develop a realisation that they have to help others. There are other

voluntary activities as well, for example, *samuha safai* in which around 100/150 girls participate in this every month. They clean the whole school on that day. Two years ago, as the school collected money which was sent to Surat when there was a flood. Similarly, once in the time of heavy winter the girls helped other needy girls in the school with woolen clothes. They also distributed woolen clothes in the nearby slum areas. All these activities, we are told, help them develop a sense of brotherhood (*bhaichara*) as well as a sense of responsibility towards the society. This is the moral education sought to be inculcated in this school.

The principal also conducts a workshop for students in the vacation for the development of moral values and leadership qualities. She has prepared a syllabus which includes various activities. For example, she has created an imaginary character called Rabia. Through this character, the idea of a good person and an ideal young woman is presented to students. Leadership qualities are merged with those of being an ideal woman. Students should be soft-spoken, independent, believe in justice and perform daily activities in the house as well. These qualities are considered essential in order to be a responsible citizen.

The quiet confidence that this principal exudes, her careful analysis of the problems that beset Hindu-Muslim relations, i.e., the “bifurcation” and separation of children into different schools according to religion which stems from the increasing ghettoisation in the living conditions of the two communities, sets a completely different tenor to the functioning of the school. She is deeply critical of the state and its control over Muslim schools by denying them no objection certificates (NOCs) in time to recruit teachers, by withdrawing financial grants on flimsy grounds, and by issuing diktats that they are forced to adhere to. She does not hesitate to condemn the state’s efforts to control education in a centralised manner, and concludes by saying “The Gujarat government has failed in education”. This is stated without rancour, as a mere statement of fact and a disillusionment with official apparatus that should in fact support educational establishments. She seeks to take the best from Islam, the

ayyat (the verses sung during assembly) and the zakat (the giving back to society) instilling in her students values she considers essential to becoming “ideal” women: leaders and homemakers. In her denial of an alternative culture for Muslims to subscribe to, she compels students to become citizens on their terms.

## 5 Conclusions

This article has briefly tried to examine how some private schools for Muslim children in Ahmedabad, with its background of communal riots and extreme violence against Muslims, tend to imagine citizenship through their experience of being marginal, errant and excluded citizens of India. The process of ghettoisation of territorial spaces has resulted in exacerbating differences between communities and in the everyday living in fear of the other. The sharply drawn boundaries not only exclude others, but also enclose those within in a possibly constraining space. This experience shapes their search for survival in a dominant, hegemonic discourse which will annihilate them if they

do not submit to its parameters of what constitutes an “authentic”, “civilised” and acceptable citizen of India. The purpose of this article has been to foreground the experience of those the state seeks to “correct” and what it has done to their perceptions of educating Muslims to become “acceptable” and “authentic” citizens of India. The state, in this context, is unconcerned with the emotional and psychological development of children affected by the brutal killings and trauma they were witness to in 2002 and the impact this may have on the formation of identity among Muslim youth. It continues to harass schools run by Muslim trusts over trivial issues and does not lend unconditional support for the development of trust and faith among children and youth to prevent further ghettoisation and hatred among communities. The outcome is fear for an uncertain future. The possibilities for change lie in students’ voices, and in their resistance, that offer the only hope for a movement away from fixed notions of citizenship education and of what it means to be a Muslim in contemporary India.

## NOTES

- 1 See also Yagnik and Sheth (2005), Varshney (2002).
- 2 Source: Interview with the president of the trust.
- 3 Source: Interview with an Ahmedabad resident.
- 4 See Froerer (2007) for an account of children’s perspectives on efforts at citizenship education in a Saraswati Shishu Mandir primary school.
- 5 See McLaren (1986), Thapan (2006), Benei (2008) for ethnographies of morning assembly and their role as “rituals” of school life.
- 6 Source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/article/show/12709888.cms>

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