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Contesting the secular school: everyday nationalism and negotiations of Muslim childhoods

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ABSTRACT

Ideas of nationalism are (re)produced, materially and discursively, in the lives of children through schools' actual and hidden curriculums that often exclude minorities and construct them as 'the other'. However, the exclusion of religious minorities has been minimally explored in understanding nationalism and childhoods. Through fieldwork conducted at a government high school in Bangalore, India, I examine how 'everyday nationalism' is experienced and negotiated within schools by religious minorities. I foreground Muslim childhoods as they negotiate the double burden of exclusion; one through the practices of the school where secularism is enacted within 'Hindu contextualism' where Hindu symbols and rituals are cast as universal, and two through the stereotypes and 'othering' discourses about Indian Muslims. I show that though the school officially claims to adhere to a 'secular' ethos, many of its actual practices are contradictory to this claim. Pedagogically, there are specific aims reserved for the Muslim child to develop into a tolerant and inclusive citizen that belongs to the nation. I also show how children across religions become political actors in this space. While some absorb the 'secular' narratives, others absorb the dominant discourses of the Muslim being the 'violent other'. Muslim children exercise their agentic capacities as they negotiate the school space with an awareness of the socio-political ramifications of being Muslim.

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Introduction

Haseena,¹ the school principal, performed "aarti", a Hindu ritual of worship or "pooja", involving the lighting of incense and offerings made to deities. On stage, however, were no deities, but framed images of several national leaders, prominent among whom was Dr. Radhakrishnan, whose birthday is celebrated in India as Teachers' Day. Adjacent to the framed photos, stood a tall brass lamp stand, a diya (lamp) and a bell. As she offered the aarti, a young girl rang the bell, in a manner typical of Hindu temples. Haseena then lit the brass lamp along with other teachers. The function ended with the singing of bhajans (devotional songs) in praise of the deity Ganesha. (Author's field notes [Sept 5, 2019])

The stage set-up and the event described show how public schools in India, allegiant to state secularism, perform ritualized events that invariably emulate practices of the majority religious group.² While doing so, they create 'hidden geographies' or micro-spaces which exclude minorities (Collins and Coleman 2008). At the end of the function, as the crowd of students and teachers began to disperse from the room, a Muslim girl who appeared confused asked me, 'Is the principal a Muslim lady?' I nodded and then she asked, in a shocked undertone, 'How come she did the pooja?' The

principal's performance seemed to have contradicted her imagination of how Muslims must behave. The vignette described demonstrates how minority religious identities are negotiated as they occupy the 'secular' school space. Though state schools in India tend to promote values of tolerance towards all religions, 'unity in diversity', they have concomitantly shown to be important sites of teaching a Hinduized idea of being Indian through rituals like *pooja* (Nambissan 2010), touching on the teachers feet, having pictures of deities, exclusive celebrations of Hindu festivals (Gogoi 2014; Srivastava 1998), linking of religious and national identity by repetitive singing of religious songs, embodiments and symbols (Bénéï 2008; Thapan 2014), disciplining of the body and mind through Hindu moral values (Deka 2014) and textbook histories³ (Thapar 2014). Indian schools have shown to thus (re)produce nationalism discourses that entail exclusion of religious minorities. Children mobilize these discourses to identify themselves as well as to construct 'the other' (Millei 2015).

Unlike other religious minorities, Muslims in India have been predominantly cast as 'the other' due to the discourses on nationalism since the Partition in 1947 (a geographical demarcation based on religion to provide a separate state for the Muslims). Since then, they have experienced significant marginalization which has led to problems of poverty, unemployment, poor access to education, healthcare, housing and being subject to various forms of violence including riots and genocides due to their religious identity (Ministry of Minority Affairs 2006, 2014). With the rise of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindutva⁴ nationalist party that is currently in power, there has been a resurgence of such discourses, an increase in open hate crimes against Muslims and serious attempts to declare India as a 'Hindu' nation (Bhatia 2019). These public discourses of nationalism interspersed with religion also percolate school spaces even if they avow secularism. Barring a few exceptions (Gogoi 2014), studies have shown that in the minds of Hindu children, 'true Indianness' was being equated to being Hindu (Deka 2014; Ellwood-Lowe et al. 2020) and Muslims were considered to be 'an undifferentiated mass of people who cannot be trusted or who can turn violent any time' making Muslims a single entity analogous of disgust, threat thereby worthy of being hated and othered (Gupta 2008, 40). Muslim children have been bullied by being name-called as 'terrorist' (Erum 2017) or 'Pakistani' (Nathan 2019). Such dominant discourses and stereotypes (of terrorism, also beef-eating and veiling) about Muslims propagated through media, movies and textbooks, and impact childhoods (Nathan 2019).

Therefore, in this paper, to examine the exclusion of Muslim childhoods within schooling, I draw on the conceptual lens of 'everyday nationalism' which refers to an ongoing (re)production of nationalism in the everyday lives of people through a number of routine activities (Billig 1995). In this paper, I contribute further to the conceptual understanding of everyday nationalism as explained by Åkerblom and Harju (2019) which encompasses both the education system that disseminates knowledge of the state's conception of nationalism and the individual who (re)lives it. Educational institutions form primary sites where children 'encounter and negotiate different ideas and practices of nationalism' (Millei 2019, 83) through actual and hidden curricula. Everyday nationalism within the hidden curriculum entails 'daily schedules, priorities laid on certain values, or embodied practices of eating, dressing, celebrations, and in language use' (Millei 2019). When these routine practices mirror the practices of the majoritarian group, they exclude minorities, thus creating 'the other'. This becomes crucial in societies wherein minorities may be construed as 'problematic', 'as a threat' or 'out of place' (Skey 2011). In such societies, children from majority groups consider themselves superior and do not consider minorities as a part of the nation (Bénéï 2008; Leonard 2012) or name-call and stereotype minorities (Zembylas 2010), whereas children from minority communities develop a fragmented self (Habashi 2008) or subtly resist nationalist discourses (Hart 2002; Bénéï 2008). These studies, though few in number, have contributed to the exploration of the relationship between childhoods and nationalism. Further, in doing so, they have emphasized that children display agency as they actively negotiate their identities. Yet most of them have focused on race/ethnic contestations with nationalism, with religion remaining understudied. In this paper, I show that religion plays a central role in the national construction of

modern schooling in India and how religious minority students negotiate nationalist ideologies that impinge on them, particularly when these ideologies exclude them from belonging to the nation.

Among the few school-based ethnographies in India that have looked at childhoods and nationalism, the voices of the religious minorities have not been explored (Srivastava 1998) or have received little attention confined only to minority-based schools (Bénéï 2008; Thapan 2014; Mathan, Anusha, and Thapan 2014). Through this paper, I make a critical contribution by bringing forth such voices as central by drawing on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted at Vidyabhav government high school in Bangalore, India. I foreground Muslim childhoods as they negotiate the double burden of exclusion; one through the material and discursive practices of the school where secularism is enacted within 'Hindu contextualism' – where Hindu symbols and rituals are cast as universal (Srivastava 1998), and two through the stereotypes and 'othering' discourses about Indian Muslims, which have significantly increased in the public sphere due to the ruling party's imagination of a Hindu nation. In doing this, I recognize children's agentic capacities in negotiating their Muslim identities within the spatio-temporal confines of schooling with an awareness of the socio-political ramifications of being Muslim. I also contribute to the less explored aspect of socio-cultural diversity of religion within research that have been 'dominated by analyses of class and race/ethnicity' (Holloway et al. 2010).

In the following sections, I trace how religion intersects with nationalism in India and is reproduced within the context of education and its exclusionary nature for the religious minorities. I then set out my research context and methodology followed by themes.

Nationalism, religion and schooling

Nationalist discourses in India have always been framed in relation to religion, as religion is an essential element of the social fabric (Van der Veer 1994). Religion was articulated very differently in the nationalist ideologies that emerged in the 1920s during the late colonial period. While the strand of Indian nationalism emphasized India's plurality and unity in diversity as essential to building an independent Indian nation, another strand of Hindu nationalists cast India as the land of the Hindus (Samad and Pandey 2007). In the imagination of the latter, Muslims were explicitly excluded and cast as 'outsiders' or 'invaders' (Thapar 2014). These differing strands were not watertight compartments, and the positions of different nationalist leaders remained on a continuum between conceptions of India as a Hindu land and a secular country. Differing visions positioned the place of religion in education distinctly. Even prior to this, during the early years of British rule, the place of religion within education was contentious as several native communities (across religious faiths) opposed religious instruction in schools fearing Christian proselytization (Sethi 2018). In the later years, the nationalist movement gained strength emphasizing the need for a distinctly 'Indian' education.

In the first vision for education through the Wardha scheme (1937),⁵ formulated by Indian nationalist leaders, Gandhi discarded religious education. He said, 'we are afraid that religions, as they are taught and practised today, lead to conflict rather than unity' (Oesterheld 2007, 7). The scheme was opposed by both Hindu and Muslim leaders as both felt the need for religious education in order to purge childhoods from western influences. However, the question of religious instruction in education remained. Alongside this, the 1930s witnessed the solidification of the Hindu-Indian identity through the nationalization of literary traditions in Hindi while excluding Urdu to cleanse 'foreign' Persian influences, especially in the northern states (Orsini 2009) and mass dissemination of Hindu mythical symbols in the public sphere (Pinney 2002). While educational schemes were posited as secular, Muslim leaders strongly opposed them as 'a symbol for establishing a religiously coloured communal dominance of a Hindu majority through the medium of education' and an attempt to subsume Muslims and their culture within the Indian-Hindu nation (Oesterheld 2006) as the lines between Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism blurred. The opposition weakened considerably as Muslims became a minority with India's independence

accompanied by the Partition. The forces of Hindu nationalism also weakened and Indian nationalism matured into Indian secular nationalism or secularism (Kotin 2015). However, the tensions around religion in education remained significant.

Post-independence, several commissions have inquired into whether children must be exposed to religious education, and if so, how. Eventually, the idea of universal/natural religion evoking common values drawing from across religious beliefs has come to prevail.⁶ However, understandings of common religious values inevitably reference Hindu texts or gurukuls as their role models emphasizing its 'universally desirable values' (*Sanatana dharma*) (Sethi 2018). It is important to recognize that the Indian constitution explicitly states 'no religious instruction shall be provided in any institution wholly maintained out of state funds' unless the state has sanctioned the institute to provide religious instruction (Article 28, Constitution of India). The Article further states that 'no person attending any educational institution shall be required to take part in any religious instruction or to attend any religious worship that may be conducted in such institution'.

Despite such an explicit constitutional commitment to a secular ethos, in practice, Hindu ritual practices are replete in the everyday routines of schools (Bénéï 2008; Nambissan 2010; Srivastava 1998; Thapan 2014 and will be further described in this paper). These very practices, however, are cast as universal or Indian, and thus as in keeping with secular commitments. These contradictions become apparent in the everyday life of public schools and are now compounded by the resurgence of Hindu nationalism discourses. I show how religious minority Muslim children experience the tension between the nation's (and school's) promise of secularism and the marked religiosity of routines within a larger socio-political context of 'othering'.

Research context, method and reflexivity

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2019–November 2019 at Vidyabhav government high school, located in a prime location in urban Bangalore, the Information Technology hub and capital city of Karnataka, in India.⁷ Spatially, since the city is roughly segregated along caste, class and religious lines (Nair 2005), the religious composition in a school typically depends on its location. Vidyabhav seemed an exception as it housed a greater number of Muslim students compared to the proportion of Muslim residents in the area. Out of the 161 students in the age group between the ages of 13 and 16 in the school, 60% identified as Hindus, 38% Muslim, and 2% Christian. A majority of the Muslim students came from four Muslim-segregated localities which were at least 10–15 miles away from the school. Several Muslim students spoke of how they chose to make this long journey because of poor quality infrastructure and education in government schools in their localities and the lack of high schools in their neighbourhoods. For their families, the long commute seemed worthwhile because education was seen as crucial for socio-economic mobility. Several Muslim children remarked on the difference between the schools in their own neighbourhoods and those in other parts of the city and perceptively described it as being spatially excluded from 'good education'.

Accessing the school entailed multiple negotiations, including permissions from the state education department, but mainly on account of my own identity as a Muslim researcher (visibly marked by my wearing of a hijab). In early conversations, the principal (also Muslim) told me that '*It's hard for us to allow researchers, especially when you come dressed like this*'. This was compounded by teachers' fear of evaluation by an outsider. On my second day at the school, she requested me to leave stating that few teachers were uncomfortable with my presence. Her concerns were manifold, but a part of her hesitation was also her own need to retain a 'secular' image and steer clear of coming across as someone who was extending support to me because of our common religious identity. I requested the principal to only allow me in classes where teachers were comfortable having me around, and she agreed. Thereafter, I was mindful of my religious identity, my presence within the school space and more cautious of bringing up religion during any discussion.

This paper draws from the observations of daily enactments of school routines, rituals, events, focus group discussions (FGDs), and formal and informal interviews. A total of 5 FGDs with 8–10 students (both boys and girls) in each group and 26 formal one-on-one interviews with students were held. Along with this, informal discussions with the teachers and the principal were also held during the course of my fieldwork. I also took a few classes to help the students with certain competitive exams, which helped me establish rapport with them.

All discussions were in Kannada or Urdu languages. Students were randomly chosen for FGDs. Initial questions were general; about their typical daily routines, place of living, how they commute, food habits, etc. This incidentally gave clear information about religious segregation within localities. Discussing routine activities like watching the news brought forth conversations about ongoing elections and political parties. These automatically led to insights into how the nation is felt and experienced. I also asked about the meanings of national festivals celebrated at schools and their associated histories learnt at the school or home. Religion recurrently emerged as a significant theme in several discussions as students spoke about the Partition, the recent beef ban and associated deaths, and the state's orders to stop celebrating the birth anniversary of Tippu Sultan (a Muslim freedom fighter). Some of these points were taken up during the interviews.

Sharing the same geographic location, cultural context, religious faith and knowing the local language (both Kannada and Urdu) with Muslim children not only gave me access to shared realities but also turned the silences during FGDs into a sense of comfort and openness that students displayed during personal interviews. For example, during the FGDs, they were silent when other students voiced their support for the ruling party; however, during the interviews, they criticized the ongoing othering (elaborated further in the analysis). My reflections here were that this would not have been possible in the absence of my religious identity, which turned out to be crucial. I also recognized my powerful position as an adult whom the students may have seen as being aligned with their school teachers though I attempted to deliberately sit along with the students on their benches during class hours or speak with them casually during breaks. My negotiations within the school as an adult were distinct from Muslim students. For instance, I could find a place to complete my afternoon prayer at school. Recognizing that my own presence and others' understanding of it shapes the field, I have accounted for my own positionality during the research and in my analysis. I used a blended approach in my analysis (Graebner, Martin, and Roundy 2012) which began with inductive coding and then moved towards deductive coding using the framework of 'everyday nationalism'.

Everyday practices that contradict the school's narrative of 'We all are one'

Several practices in the school showed the state's imagination of the child within the school to be predominantly Hindu and catered to the cultural practices of Hindu children. On a typical day, the morning assembly began with the school prayer. Children joined their hands neatly as in Hindu ritual worship for the daily prayer. The prayer song celebrated the land of Karnataka as having witnessed reincarnations of certain Hindu deities and being home to several Hindu, philosophers, rulers, poets and saints. It also mentioned spiritual teachers of religious faiths, other than Islam and Christianity, such as Buddhist, Jain and Sikh as these religions are subsumed within Hinduism, especially in the process of nation-building (Thapar 2014). The prayer ended on a note that describes the state as the one where all religions peacefully co-exist. It discursively positioned a set of Hindu symbols as secular through claims of religious co-existence, equality and harmony between all communities – *we all are one* ('navella ondey' in Kannada).

Similarly, blurred lines between Indian secular nationalism and Hindu nationalism were evident as school functions at Vidyabhav (Teacher's Day – described earlier, Independence Day, Republic Day and so on) were marked by poojas (ritual worship) and bhajans (devotional songs that praise Hindu deities). In these moments of great festivity, all children were involved in decorations and making logistical arrangements prior to such events. On the day of the event, as performing

religious rituals during non-religious events was a norm, it was also evident on stage that Hindu students were chosen for central roles; to perform the poojas, compère and sing bhajans as part of the choir. Celebrations usually ended with bhajans sung in chorus by the entire school, based on instructions from the music teacher. As all children were expected to participate, it is important to recognize how these celebrations affected the schooling experience for religious minorities since 'rituals that are followed in national celebrations normativize citizenship' (Lappalainen 2006, 108). Excluding children based on their caste identities during national festivals as shown by Nambissan (2010) elsewhere in India were not evident at Vidyabhav probably because a vast majority of the children belonged to the so-called lower castes. While the Hindu child was able to engage continually throughout these events, the Muslim/Christian child had to participate only in a limited number of ways. S/he had to assist backstage, with logistics, could only sing as part of the audience but not perform on stage. As Lappalainen (2006) and Hemming (2011) draw on the context of schools in Finland and England, respectively, observations at Vidyabhav also demonstrated how religion is centrally woven into conceptions of the nation. Though religion was never explicitly emphasized in the Finnish school, Lappalainen critiques the notion of multiculturalism which in reality naturalizes hegemonic culture and reifies differences. At Vidyabhav, this contrast became sharper wherein dominant culture is explicit, leading to 'a social and mental construction where "the other" is tolerated within the national space but where the dominant group still decides the scope of participation for the minority' (Åkerblom and Harju 2019, 6). Further, the burden of inclusivity lies on the minority (as I will continue to demonstrate).

This was also seen to reflect in the pedagogy and the curriculum. The state's official music syllabus (a compulsory subject) was not neutral. It comprised of various bhajans taught by the music teacher, trained in Carnatic music.⁸ In one of the music classes I attended, the teacher and students sang '*Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram*' (a popular bhajan in praise of the Hindu deity Ram) which contains the lyrics '*Ishwar Allah tero naam*' (Ishwar and Allah are also your names, Oh God) in unison. In all other music classes I observed, the routine did not involve any explanation of the song, the students would copy the lyrics and repeat the bhajan after the teacher until they got the rhythm and the scale of the musical notes right. However, on the day they sang '*Ishwar Allah tero naam*' – she went on to explain that *Allah* (an Arabic word for God specifically used by Muslims) was an alternate name for *Bhagwan* (a Hindi word for God specifically used by Hindus). She further explained '*God is one and we should not fight in the name of religion. I visit all holy places like temples, churches and dargas, and I don't differentiate between any religion, "navella onday" and these are only names. We follow the God that our parents teach us but in reality, God is one.*'

The music teacher's emphasis that '*Allah*' need not be distinct and her added explanation points to its justification that making religion important can threaten secularism. On other occasions as well, teachers taught children to be 'secular' and not to be divided in the name of religion. In other subjects, the school textbooks depict the figure of the ideal Muslim is one who doesn't place importance only on his religion and demonstrates his acceptance of Hindu religious practices and ideals. For example, the Class 8 Kannada textbook has a lesson titled '*Maggada Saheba*', a Muslim weaver whose ancestors were very popular because of their secular attitude. They were well known for building temples along with mosques, thus upholding the ideal of oneness/unity. In general, the curriculum showed Muslim figures (historical and others) who accepted majoritarian values and practices in a positive light, furthering and fostering the idea of secularism as a dilution of minority identities. This is similar to what Åkerblom and Harju (2019) describe as having two different pedagogies for two groups of children in the same setting, in which one of them is assumed to have the right kind of national identity while the other is being compensated 'for something perceived as missing, the "right" kind of national capital' (10). Thus, the development of an inclusive or tolerant identity, a key ingredient in the building of a secular Indian citizen is aimed at the Muslim child in particular which is perhaps linked to dominant discourses of them being labelled as anti-national (Engineer 2004).

A look at the school's calendar also revealed its temporal alignment with Hindu festivals by closing for three days during Ganesh Chaturthi, one day for Eid and one day for Christmas and a long break for Dussehra and Diwali.⁹ Such material practices were not considered antithetical to secularism. In practice, this also had brought forth conversations around religious differences and had made the Muslim child conscious of his/her faith. It was a common practice for all students to extend their leaves even after the school's sanctioned holiday was over, especially after long breaks. After Ganesh Chaturthi, many students were absent. However, the teachers heavily criticized only the Muslim students for being absent after a Hindu festival. Across classes, I noticed that the teachers called out particular names and asked 'Does Abrar celebrate Ganesha for him to take leave?' and similarly they named other Muslim absentees. This was also seen in the event of other Hindu festivals when Muslim children were particularly reprimanded for extending their leave as it was not their festival.

Vidyabhav thus represented a school site where India's everyday nationalism and socio-political histories were played out. The school ethos had a dual function – first, where it acted as a mediator to inculcate nationalist values through the everyday reproduction of the dominant group's socio-religious practices, and second where it acted as a mediator to promote unity, multicultural values which in fact reinforce 'the other' (Hjerm 2001). Since the school practices were aligned with the practices of Hindu children, it was only the Muslim/Christian child who had to demonstrate his/her religious tolerance by accepting and performing school rituals that were ostensibly secular, but truly religious. In order to prove that the Muslim child had imbibed secular values, s/he needed to join the religious practices at the school while the Hindu child's 'secular' identity was never put to test.

Intersections with linguistic and gender identities

Apart from religion, nationalism discourses are known to intersect with language (Leonard 2012), gender (Silova 2019; Millei, Silova, and Piattoeva 2018) and race/ethnicity (Lappalainen 2006; Zembylas 2010; Christou and Spyrou 2017) in daily lives of children. However, very few studies have examined these categories together. Christou and Spyrou (2017) illustrate Greek-Cypriot children's diminished ability to identify intersectional identities of minorities – Greek children used additional markers of gender and religion to denote Turkish-Cypriots as the racialized 'other'. This was due to a powerful national narrative compounded by their lack of interactions with the Turkish-Cypriot minorities. In India, Bénéi (2008) finds a similar conflation of 'linguistic and religious identification with national identification' (198). In my study, gender and linguistic/regional identities became enmeshed with nationalism discourses linked to religion. Marking out students and teachers of the Muslim community through language took two forms – first, by associating Kannada or being 'Kannadiga' (which is a linguistic identity derived from belonging to the state of Karnataka) only to Hindu children, and second by using language in a way that signalled the Muslim as the undifferentiated other.

With regards to the first point, the association of Kannada and Hinduism has been previously inked in Aluru Venkata Rao's (1917) historical construction of the Kannada nation (*Karnatakadevi*) as a Hindu nation whose glory ended due to the conquest of Islam (for a similar construction of India as '*Bharatmata*', see Bacchetta 2000). In Bangalore, Kannada nationalism could not make its desired impact because it has been historically dominated by non-Kannada speakers. Bangalore's cultural nationalism was largely taken over 'economic nationalism', never breaking the hegemony of English (Nair 1996). Yet, at Vidyabhav, for Muslim students and teachers (Urdu being the mother tongue) their spoken and literal fluency in Kannada did not lead to their easy assimilation into the regional identity. As I conversed with Shankar (a Hindu boy) in Kannada, he positioned me outside of our shared linguistic identity. Since he had just joined the school, I asked him how was this school different from his previous school, and he replied, '*The main difference is that there are*

many Muslim students here as compared to my previous school which had only Kannada boys, and your boys (nimm hudugaru) make a lot of noise in the class, they don't let us study.'

The manner in which he may have perceived me, as he said 'your boys' without any hesitation, showed that he not only considered the Muslim identity antithetical to the linguistic identity but asserted that only Hindus could be Kannadigas. He had also made my religious identity salient over my adult or researcher identity. On another occasion, a teacher told me '*Our Kannada teacher is a Muslim, how great is she that despite being Muslim she is a Kannada teacher*'. Adult attitudes and perceptions about the nation are transmitted to children, thus influential in continually reproducing 'us' and 'them' (Bennett et al. 2004). Exclusion faced by minorities at school due to language has been documented in several Indian states like Orissa, Rajasthan, Assam etc. All the studies indicate that the medium of instruction at school was not understood by the minorities because it was completely different from their mother tongue or was a different local dialect (see Ramachandran and Naorem 2013). In global contexts, like Cyprus, minority Turkish-Cypriot children who spoke Greek (the language of the majority) experienced greater assimilation (Zembylas 2010) whereas, in Ireland, children were ambivalent and at times challenged the association of the Irish language to national identity (Moffatt 2011; Waldron and Pike 2006). My findings point to the atypical exclusion faced by Muslim students. A sense of othering is experienced in the regional identity despite being born, brought up and being fluent in the language of the state.

With regards to the second point, on several occasions, teachers referred to students in ways that foregrounded their religious identities; '*Where is that student, I don't know her name, she is Muslim*' or (I was told) '*You can talk to that student, she is from your community (nimmauru)*'. There is an obviously spoken categorization by use of words like '*they*' (*auru*) and '*our people*' (*nammauru*) or simply by pointing to the students by identifying them as Muslim. This may not necessarily be derogatory but points to a clear demarcation of students along religious lines. Thus, language became an important means to express who belongs to the nation and who does not. This was also internalized by some Muslim students leading to confusion when questioned further about their identities. During an assignment where a Kannada wedding invite was needed, Shireen (a Muslim girl) proudly said '*It should be easier for Kannada people ('Kannadawale') to get this assignment done, but I did it first*'. She did not consider herself as a Kannadiga as she felt she had excelled in something that was not meant to be her domain. When I asked her about it, she felt it was obvious that Kannada was not her language. I asked '*But then you said you were born here and you study in a Kannada medium school and speak Kannada so fluently, right?*' She felt confused not knowing how she had come to this conclusion about herself. However, I argue that she perpetuates the idea of being 'the other' 'since one's conception of national belonging is always intimately bound up with how one perceives, and how others perceive, the place in which one lives' (Scourfield et al. 2006, 13).

When it comes to gender, the school's imagination of the girl child included religious symbols. Hindu girls often wore bindis, kumkum (vermillion applied to the forehead) and sacred threads to school and this was considered a desirable way to dress whereas hijabs were not allowed. In fact, a teacher said to Wajida (a Muslim girl) '*Why don't you at least wear a bindi or something in your neck?*' again pointing to symbolic interpretations of Indian femininity as Hindu womanhood. Wajida however did not respond and stood there quietly until she let her go. With respect to a male child, stereotypes associated with the Muslim adult were projected onto them. Constructions of Hindus and Muslims using dichotomies of ahimsak (non-violent) versus violent through food habits, slaughter and religious sacrifice of animals (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012) have intensified in the public domain due to the recent visible political campaigns on cow slaughter ban and multiple deaths of Muslims by cow vigilante groups backed by Hindutva organizations (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016). Discursively, food habits and personal characteristics have been wedded together, for example, in a recent election campaign in Karnataka, where Prime Minister Modi made the particular association of the beef trade (mostly carried out by Muslims) to terrorism (Rukmini 2019) furthering the beef-eating stereotype and linking it to the 'violent other'. This stereotype was

reproduced at school on many occasions with respect to the boys. The principal said to me *'It is the Muslim children (referring to the boys) who do all the mischief, they don't want to study'*. Shankar (mentioned earlier) felt that Muslim boys (except a few) made too much noise and made it difficult for everyone to study. When I asked him why he doesn't complain to the teachers, he replied *'If I complain, they (Muslims) will hit me outside the school'*. He denied having any such experience – *'No they have never hit me but I heard from seniors and others that they will hit'*. I asked if he knew anyone who had been hit. He admitted not knowing anyone personally but believed that Muslim boys could be violent towards him. His understanding that the Muslim child was 'violent' points to an extrapolation of the stereotypes about male Muslim adults to boys.

Linguistic and gender identities were not only enmeshed but subsumed under nationalism discourses linked to religion, thus creating an essentialized other. Most of the Muslim girls at Vidyahav entered the school veiled in a hijab, abaya/burqa, face veil over their uniforms and removed it as soon as they joined the morning assembly. While some spoke of being accustomed to removing the burqa at school, others found it discomforting. Ruqya said *'Only in the school I remove it, otherwise I wear it whenever I go out, it makes me feel good'* whereas Rumana said in a regretful tone, *'We have to follow the school rules, so we will remove it'*. As I sat in some of the classes, a few of the Muslim girls attempted to wear back the hijab, but were reprimanded by teachers who asked them to remove it stating that the uniform did not allow this. Though many of the girls spoke about veiling as a desirable part of their religious practice, they conformed to the school's uniform. I further elaborate such negotiations in the following theme.

The Muslim child's conformity and resistance

On questioning several Muslim children about their faith, the common thread that emerged across all narratives was a deep commitment to their religious faith outside the school – they took on to religious education from the age of four or five years and continued attending madrasahs before or after school, and followed religious practices like daily prayers, fasting and wearing the hijab (for girls). Children were also, however, aware that they must not appear 'too religious' in school. This conformity was more pronounced in the presence of teachers than peers. One example of this was Wajida's silence when asked about wearing a bindi by the teacher. Similarly, I noticed that no Muslim child questioned why the music syllabus only had songs praising Hindu deities or as to why *Allah* was explained as an alternative name to *Bhagwan*. Scourfield et al. (2013) explain the limited agency of minority Muslim children at a state-run school in Cardiff, United Kingdom where they only lip-synced Christian hymns instead of singing. If they were caught in such an act, the teachers scolded them and forced them to sing. In my fieldwork, I observed that while Muslim children did sing, their disinterest was apparent given that they tended to talk amongst themselves more when compared to Hindu children who sang enthusiastically. Elsewhere, Muslim parents, in Finland, did not actually let their children participate in the school's religious celebrations though they verbally agreed to do so (due to the class-teacher's persuasion) mainly to avoid being termed as 'difficult clients' or Islam being labelled as a very strict religion (Lappalainen 2006).

Children also expressed their negotiations when it came to their daily prayers. During an interview with Rihana, as we discussed her life outside of school, she mentioned that after school she attended a madrasah and did her daily prayers apart from helping her mother. On asking her about the afternoon prayer, she said, *'Yes, I know we have to pray but the school won't allow it, so I go home and complete it'*. Her classmate Zeenat said, *'Since I live far, by the time I reach home, it will be late so I miss the afternoon prayer ... I can't help it ... in case I am at home or reach early I do ... But I fast during Ramadan'*. Other studies in the UK have shown how the Muslim communities' negotiations with the school to allow for prayer have been chequered; in some cases, Muslim parents have been able to negotiate with the school to allow for prayer during school (Scourfield et al. 2013), whereas in others, devout Muslim children have prayed even in the toilets

(Hemming 2011). Muslim students at Vidyabhav recognized that their prayer was obligatory; however, they skipped the afternoon prayer on school days.

Ubed provided details of this conformity – ‘*Other people think Muslims fight more that’s why Muslims should never get into fights, this will only give them (Hindus) another reason to stereotype us and say why are these Muslims behaving like this*’. Ubed recognized that Muslim students were expected to conform to the school’s religious rituals and if there was any form of resistance, it appears that he feared they would be stereotyped or be seen as communal rather than indisciplined. Also, these responses indicate knowledge of gendered stereotypes. The Muslim children’s conformity cannot be explained as a result of typical disciplining as it entails responses to social representations associated with their religious identity and absorption of the school’s pedagogy of an ideal Muslim figure.

Another explanation of this conformity lies in the fact that children were aware of travelling all the way to Vidyabhav to secure a quality education as a means to fight ‘backwardness’ given the civic neglect within their spatially segregated homes and schools. Though this may be true of other marginalized communities, ‘the overlap between structural violence of poverty and violence of communalism’ (Manjrekar 2015) places Muslim childhoods in compounded vulnerabilities. Children navigated the school space with an awareness of the socio-political ramifications of being Muslim. This could also be the reason why most Muslim children, in particular, were very quiet on matters of food, festivals, etc. which pertain to religious practices during group discussions. However, during personal interviews, there was a striking openness. I observed the contrast between downplayed religious identities in groups and assertions during interviews.

For example, Faizan shared his experiences of negotiating his friendship with a Hindu boy, Nishant, with whom he had cultivated a friendship since Class 1 (6 years). This friendship was put to test when Kaushik, another Hindu boy objected to this friendship in Class 7 since Faizan consumed beef. Faizan explained that Kaushik made several attempts to break his friendship with Nishant, going to the extent of almost beating him. This also led Nishant to temporarily withdraw his friendship with Faizan which was only restored once Kaushik left the school. Faizan not only had resisted Kaushik’s warnings but asserted himself by stating that there is nothing wrong with consuming beef. While food preferences had not been a bone of contention for the two boys earlier, even though children even as young as six years have been noted to understand food habits as markers of religious difference (Nesbitt 2004; Becher 2008), the two children had even shared their lunch, Kaushik’s narrative of identifying beef as ‘cow meat’ and as the meat of Hindu God appeared to be influential. Interestingly, he did not object to Nishant’s friendship with other non-Muslim students who also consumed beef. In raising objection to this specific friendship, Kaushik appeared to be echoing the heightened public discourse around beef consumption- the political identification and targeting of Muslim populations for consuming beef under the Hindutva agenda of the ruling government, whereas Faizan and Nishant had absorbed the narrative of ‘*navella ondey*’. Faizan added, ‘*For me, religion is important, it’s the right path, but the BJP government doesn’t like Muslims, they don’t want us to be united, there are many crimes against Muslims nowadays ... but I am not scared because I trust Allah. Also, my teachers have taught us that we should not differentiate between Hindu-Muslim and fight so in the school I make friends with all religions.*’

While relationships were cordial among the different religious groups at school, and children mostly demonstrated strong in-group preferences with respect to close friendships, instances of inter-religion friendships were also observed.

Within the Hindutva discourse, cow slaughter is constructed as ‘Muslim male self-assertion through the violation of the sacred Hindu female body (as cow- mother -goddess)’ (Bacchetta 2000) and ‘vegetarian politics’ has been widely used as one of the ways to establish anti-Muslim sentiments (Fischer 2019). Both Hindu and Muslim children at Vidyabhav were aware of these discursive constructions and seemed to both reproduce and challenge them, at different points. In one discussion I had with students about food habits, the atmosphere had become communally charged.

All the Hindu children began to cheer for Somesh (a Hindu boy) as he said *'we pray to the cow and they slaughter it and this should be stopped'*. Abid (a Muslim boy) retaliated *'Then why do you eat chicken by slaughtering it?'* and Shireen angrily responded *'more than us, they (Hindus) eat, they are found more in number in the meat stalls selling beef but why do they target us then?'* I sensed how the discussion itself was beginning to polarize the group, dissolved the discussion immediately and urged students to acknowledge the diversity in the class without getting into categories of 'us' and 'them'. I feared the possibility of a fight, and how its escalation to the teachers could easily mark me out as communal. My own fears at that moment made me realize how Muslim children and perhaps the staff had to navigate conversations around religion. Children's resistance and assertions were seen more clearly with peers, as Faizan and Nishant resisted cutting off friendships, and Shireen openly contested the idea that only Muslims consumed beef;¹⁰ however, most Muslim children chose to remain quiet during such discussions (either due to my presence as an adult or continued conformity with their peer group).

Conclusion

Religious minorities have been minimally discussed within the literature concerning nationalism and childhoods. Through this paper, I have aimed to bring attention to how Muslim children in India (re)interpret and negotiate nationalism discourses casting them as 'the other' within the school site. While exploring nationalism in children's daily institutional lives, my findings suggest that we can think of the school site more broadly – not only as a pedagogic site where children learn who does or does not belong to the nation, but also a site where children enact nationalism discourses absorbed from media and the socio-political sphere. In this study, I hope to have demonstrated that both of these aspects are crucial. Though the state school officially claims to adhere to values of secular nationalism, which emphasizes India's diversity and tolerance towards all religions, many of its practices are contradictory to this claim. The school's imagination of the child being predominantly Hindu becomes apparent in its curricular and non-curricular activities/events such as celebrations of national festivals, school prayer and holiday calendar. Thus, the study also adds to the existing critique of secularism and multiculturalism in schools (Lappalainen 2006; Åkerblom and Harju 2019; Hjerm 2001; Hemming 2011) as they naturalize practices of the dominant groups and reify the 'other'. I add to this critique by showing that the burden of demonstrating inclusivity lies on the minority children as they are expected to perform/conform to the majoritarian practices. This burden, increased by a powerful national narrative disseminated in the public sphere that casts the non-Hindu as 'the other', more specifically the Muslim as the 'violent other', has crucial implications on the Muslim children's identity development. Such loaded projections onto childhoods that disallow them to have a child-centred experience growing up at school can be applied in global (Islamophobic) contexts. Though all children encounter competing and often contradictory narratives, it is for the minority children to figure out how they must position themselves in relation to dominant discourses which become naturalized (Scourfield et al. 2006). It must be emphasized that children's positioning also varies based on social actors. As I have illustrated, Muslim children largely performed the school ethos with an awareness of downplaying their religious identity, especially in presence of teachers; however, they openly challenged and resisted being cast as the 'other' with their peers and displayed a mix of silence (FGDs) and openness (interviews) when they interacted with me. This shows how minority children used their agentic abilities as they navigated the school space while they constructed their own national identities.

Another important, yet underexplored, consideration while studying nationalism in children's lives is the use of an intersectional lens. I have shown how 'the other' became further essentialized in the minds of children as nationalism discourses were able to powerfully conflate multiple identities. For example, one of the most unique findings of this study is the atypical exclusion of Muslim students based on linguistic identity, despite studying in the state's Kannada medium school and being fluent in the language. This has so far not been found in any context to my knowledge, within

India and globally, as exclusion has always been found to be a result of not knowing the language. Also, children from the majority group were unable to recognize the intersectional identities of minority children despite their close interactions, unlike previous findings demonstrated by Christou and Spyrou (2017). Thus, intersectionality can provide rich insights into children's identity constructions of self and the other and must receive more attention in future research.

Lastly, as Millei and Imre (2021) point out that since institutional spaces in many countries are now frequented with right-wing political discourses that influence affective and pedagogic dimensions, there is a significant need to explore childhoods. India is one such example wherein anti-minority sentiments and violence, which includes children, have gained serious momentum (more after this fieldwork) and have often been justified as legitimate (Human Rights Watch 2021; Pandey 2021). This calls for greater attention to how institutional spaces and children (re)interpret and (re)produce these discourses in their daily lives.

Notes

1. All names of institutions and people in the paper are pseudonyms, introduced to protect confidentiality of research participants.
2. Hinduism is the dominant religion practiced in India by 79.8% of the population. However, practices within Hinduism are diverse across regions, castes and cultures. Islam is practiced by 14.2% of the population.
3. Controversies around history textbooks illustrate the manner in which these competing discourses are played out. Secular historians have been critical of certain nationalists' versions for their strong communalist stance, skewed derogatory representations of Muslims and promotion of communal strife, while censoring parts that convey multi-religious tolerance and diversity (see Delhi Historians Group 2001; Habib, Jaiswal, and Mukherjee 2003).
4. Hindutva is a predominant and militant form of Hindu nationalism that points particularly to the Muslims as 'the other'.
5. Wardha scheme advocated free and compulsory education for all and Vidya Mandir scheme was to provide basic education in villages in the mother tongue of the community. Both excluded Urdu language. Other literary traditions include making Hindi language central.
6. Post-partition, several contestations remained as different commissions, over the years, debated whether children must study and appreciate others religions to prevent prejudice for the nation to be united (Radhakrishnan Commission, 1963, Sri Prakasha Committee, 1960, Kothari Commission, 1966), whether majority children should be stopped from learning Hindu holy scriptures such as Gita and epics like Ramayana, or if children must study moral values common to all religions (81st Report on Value Based Education/ SB Chavan Committee, 1999).
7. The population of Bangalore city comprises of Hindus (79%), and the people from minority religions including Muslims (14%), Christians (6%) and other religions (1%) (Census 2011).
8. A type of Indian classic music evolved from ancient Hindu traditions.
9. Ganesh Chaturthi, Dusshera and Diwali are major Hindu festivals which honour different deities.
10. Beef eating practices among Hindus are non-homogenous. Current research shows that beef eating has been under-reported by Hindus due to cultural-political pressures (Khara, Riedy, and Ruby 2020) and beef eating was found to be 96% more than actually reported (Natrajan and Jacob 2018).

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