

Development of a Secular Identity in Religious Denomination Schools: A Case-Study

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Abstract

The period of adolescence is difficult to describe, especially so in the Indian context that is characterized by disparity and diversity, which leads to a variety of experiences for adolescents. These experiences are influenced by several factors that include caste, class, religion, gender and geographical location. Contemporary research on adolescence and the growing up years highlight how our understanding of adolescence has been dominated by an American Eurocentric view. Hence, there is a need to understand the experience of adolescence within its relevant socio cultural context. Through this study an effort is made to understand the experience of adolescence located in the school ethos. Further, since adolescence is a time of change, it offers the adolescents with the impetus to reevaluate themselves in the light of these changes and develop their own identity; thus the dimension of identity development is also explored in the present study. Additionally, school and its religious affiliations are important factors that impact the construction of an adolescent's identity. Therefore, the central focus of this study is to understand the role of religion and the construction of identity of the adolescents as it takes place in a Sikh Minority school.

Keywords: Adolescence, School Ethos, Identity, Religion

Adolescence as a Unique Stage

Adolescence presents itself as an important period of transition in an individual's life. Adolescents are influenced by several factors that include caste, class, religion, gender and geographical location. Further, the lived realities that characterize every adolescent's life also pose difficulties in universalizing the adolescent experience or considering it a monolith. Despite, the ambiguity in the conceptualization of the nature of adolescence, there seems to be consensus that adolescence begins with the biological changes of puberty and ends when the individual assumes adult roles and responsibilities (Dusek, 1987).

It is important to bring to light that though adolescence begins with biological changes, which can be seen as universal, the experience of adolescence evolves in a cultural milieu. Thus, aspects like nature of adolescence, its duration as a

developmental stage, may differ across different cultures (Dusek, 1987).

Contemporary research on adolescence and the growing up years highlight how our understanding of adolescence has been dominated by an American Eurocentric view. In reality however, there are markedly different “adolescences” in other parts of the world. (Brown & Larson, 2002)

Moreover, the Indian adolescent until recently had been perceived as one homogenous group having similar issues and characteristics, however, they can be differentiated based on gender, class, caste, geographical location and religion (UNFPA, 2000).

Similar ideas related to the complex nature of Indian adolescence are also echoed in T. S. Sarawathi's works. She argues that the form that adolescence takes within a culture as well as across cultures presents a kaleidoscope representing



diversity (Verma & Saraswathi, 2002). Additionally, in the Indian context, several cross sectional and longitudinal studies point towards a gendered and a class based nature of adolescence. Considering the above points, it can be posited that there is a need to understand the experience of adolescence within the relevant socio cultural context. Through this study an effort has been made to understand the experience of adolescence and their construction of identity located within the ethos of a Sikh minority school.

Adolescent's Construction of Identity

Adolescence is a time of change starting from pubertal biological and physical changes, to psychological, cognitive as well as social changes. These changes provide the adolescents with the opportunities and the impetus to reevaluate themselves and hence develop their own identity.

Identity can be understood as finding answers to the question: Who am I? ; defining one's sense of self in terms of the feelings and ideas that one holds about oneself. It is a person's self developed, internal and ever changing organization of attitude and beliefs (Dusek, 1987). For Kakar (1978) identity is the process of synthesis between the inner and the outer social reality and a feeling of continuity and consistency of the self.

Erikson (1968) states that identity development takes place at the end of adolescence when the adolescent embraces the identifications of the past and makes a coherent sense of self. Although identity development is a lifespan process of exploration, it is during adolescence that it becomes a pressing concern.

However, recent researches attempt to move beyond a psychological perspective of ego identity to a more sociological perspective on identity. Thus stating that apart from being a definition of one's own self, identity can also be defined as being related to people's sense of belonging and how they situate themselves in a wider socio cultural context (Marshall, 1998).

An individual not only identifies with one single grand identity, but grapples with different identities. It is the totality of all these identifications that makes a complex identity (Sen,

2002). In the Indian context factors such as caste, class and gender play a very important role to produce one's identity (Sarup, 1996). Moreover, since our everyday lives revolve around many identities each of them being interconnected so some identities are often complimentary and others competing, but each of these defines in totality who we are. Identity thus can be understood as being dynamic and fluid and a constantly evolving process of becoming rather than simply 'being' (Dillon, 1999).

Since, it has been argued above that identity is complex and multidimensional in nature, having a number of dimensions to it. In the light of this argument I would like to elaborate on two dimensions of identity, in the next sections; Religious identity and identity with respect to school and its ethos.

Religious Identity

The concept of religious identity was first given by Hans Mol (1976, 1979) and later extended by Seul (1999). Religious identity can be understood as an individual's identification with a religious tradition. Religion provides the strongest kind of identity to an individual. The religious norms and values are communicated through texts and books and since they operate at the transcendental level, so exert greater influence on the individual.

Another conception of religious identity has been expounded by Berger and Luckman (1991). For them religious identity is acquired as early as the process of primary socialization. Thus the sense of religious identity tends to develop in the early years of one's life.

In the Indian context, study by Gupta (2008) shows that religious identity of Hindu and Muslim children is developed through the process of socialization by the family. Religious symbols, rituals, festivals and other religious practices that are present in the sphere of the child help to reinforce and internalize the religious identity.

Since schools, especially ones affiliated to a religion, provide sites for development of a religious identity in the Indian adolescent, so it is important to consider this dimension as well. The next section attempts to discuss studies that present



how schooling can have an impact on the identity of the student.

Role of School in Identity Construction

School plays a very important role in the life of an adolescent. It is a place where maximum alert wakeful hours of an adolescent are spent. The life at school and the interaction therein shapes the identity of the students. Each school has its own culture and ethos, which influences the lives of its students. The school culture can include anything from its infrastructure, teacher student relationships, school artifacts, language/s spoken, to the numerous practices taking place at the school. All these have an impact on the student, directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly. This culture that the school presents to the students has an important role to play in the student's construction of a sense of self (McLeod & Yates, 2006).

The process of schooling also plays an important role in the formal and informal socialization of the students. Thus, a major part of the adolescent's sense of identity may be attributed to the experiences and time spent at school. The school which was chosen for the present study was a Sikh minority school. In order to understand the impact that it can have on the development of religious identity, it is important to first take into account the background in which the minority schools operate.

Minority schools have been prevalent in India for quite some time now. The range includes the Christian Convents and Missionary schools, the Islamic Maqtabas and Madrassas and the Sikh minority schools. The setting up of these minorities' schools has been legitimized by the constitution. Article 29 and 30 has been placed in the Indian constitution, to safeguard the rights of the minorities in India.

Thus, it is imperative to understand that in the process of promoting one's culture, what impact these minority schools have on the identity development of the students.

Since in this study we are considering schools that are affiliated to a particular religion, so in such schools the identification of students with religion may be different and thus it is important to consider

the role of religion in such schools.

In a study done by Parul Bhandari (2014) in a girl's convent school in Delhi it was found that the minority school faced a challenge when it came to imparting of religious education. The school faced a dilemma while emphasizing its religious identity and at the same time not overstepping on children's religious identity.

Though, the school intended to treat everyone equally, however, through the practices at school the religious affiliation of the school did impact the ethos of the school. This study has significant implications, primarily the need to understand the role of religious minority schools in the construction of identity of adolescents.

Thus in summary, adolescence as a phase doesn't take place in vacuum. It is influenced by a number of factors which must be taken into account in order to understand the most important challenge that an adolescent faces- the development of identity. The present research was undertaken to study the unique interplay of religion, identity and experiences of adolescence, as evolving within the specific setting of the school.

The study had the following research objectives:

- To study the experience of growing up in a Sikh Minority school
- To study the role of religion in the identity development of Sikh/Non-Sikh adolescents.
- To study the role that the school plays in the development of a religious identity.

Overview of the Study

As mentioned above for the purpose of the present study a Sikh minority school was selected. This school was established in 1991 under the auspices of a Sikh Education Society. It is CBSE affiliated and has classes from 1-12.

A purposive sample was drawn, consisting of both boys and girls, belonging to different religions, studying in the chosen minority school. In order to study the development of identity over the span of the adolescent years, the sample group of participants was drawn from classes, 9, 10 and 11. The age range was 14-17 years.



Table 1: Profile of Participants

Religion	Number of Participants
Sikh	64
Non Sikh	24
Total	88

In the first phase of data collection, a focused group discussion was conducted with 8 students (4 boys, 4 girls) of classes 8, 10 and 11. The major objective of the FGD was to know through the students, the role that the school played in the development of a religious identity. Apart from this, a self reporting measure was used. The nature of questions was open ended; a few situational questions as well as word association type items were also included in the questionnaire. The areas covered in the questionnaire were self, social, school, family and religion

After the administering of the questionnaire, the responses were analyzed by extracting the frequently occurring themes. These themes were then analyzed and inferences were drawn from them. In addition, significant narratives of the respondents in the questionnaires were also identified, collated and analyzed.

Discussion of Findings

Experience of Growing up

One of the major objectives of this study was to explore the adolescent experience as it unfolds within the socio-cultural milieu. The findings from the data revealed that most of the adolescents, regardless of grade, gender and religion reported being both happy and satisfied with the experience of growing up. However, at the same time there seemed to be a duality when it came to their experience. Many adolescents reported being happy and satisfied as result of the underlying changes and getting more responsibilities but at the same time they also reported experiencing conflicts and challenges due to pressure of studies and apprehensions about the future.

In addition, the study revealed that this phase was characterized by learning and exploring new things

and engaging in various areas of interest. Yet at the same time most of the adolescents reported having conflicts, which revolved around worry about the future, having pressure of academics and being concerned about their career.

Construction of Religious Identity

Religious identity may refer to a person's identification with a faith. It usually develops in tandem with family influences. In the present study it was seen that both Non Sikh and Sikh adolescents reported being religious and engaging in the religious practices of Sikhism regularly. The important sources from which they learnt about religion were the family and grandparents in particular. Many Sikh participants also reported learning about their religion from school. Thus the family's religious affiliation had a key role to play in the lives of adolescents. In fact the family's religious affiliation, religious practices they engaged in and expectations from their children molded the religious identity of the adolescents.

Another significant finding of this study was that the Sikh students had a very strong sense of religious identity. Religiosity for Sikh students was understood in the form of external manifestations, rules, rituals, practices and rites of religion. Most Sikh students displayed pride about Sikhism. Their religiosity revolved around preserving their identity through the religious symbols: maintain long hair, more for boys than for girls, five K's and visiting the Gurudwara. Thus we see that they had distinct traditional leanings in terms of maintaining their religious identity yet at the same time they were modern in their outlook when it came to adolescent experiences. Interestingly no conflict was reported in the students in terms of mandating this strong sense of religious identity and at the same time having adolescent experiences.

Another important finding of the study was that Non Sikh adolescents reported having more religious tolerance; their responses stated that all religions were the same. Further what was also observed was that though they knew about Sikhism and respected the school, their Sikh friends and the Sikh practices, but at the same time



they maintained their own separate religious identity. There was no conflict that could be visibly seen in terms of development of a religious identity due to different religious affiliations of parents and school.

Identity Construction in a Religious Minority School

The school plays a very important role in development of an identity. This was also explored in the study. It must be first noted that the study revealed both Sikh and Non Sikh students equally recognized the school's affiliation to Sikhism. However, the data showed distinct experiences for both Sikh and Non Sikh students

The Sikh students had a sense of homecoming or belongingness since the same religion was being practiced in their homes. There was thus no scope for conflict. It was also observed that the school ethos had an impact on the Sikh students, which was reflected in them having a strong sense of religious identity.

Non Sikh students also liked the school, they knew the affiliation and some reported that Sikhs got preferential treatment but there was no evidence of conflict in their religious identity. While they engaged in the same practices as the Sikh students, yet there was no reported conflict in their own religious identity or that which the school promoted. They remained rooted in the former. This may be attributed to the school not imposing strict adherence to Sikhism for all.

Educational Implications

The present study has generated a number of implications that would be of interest to educators, schools and parents. It should be however noted that these implications are by no means exhaustive. They are intended to stimulate thinking and research in the study of adolescence especially within the ethnic/religious minority schools.

The study contributed to the way of understanding the nature of adolescence as evolving in its own unique socio-cultural milieu. In this case, since the sample of adolescent was from within a Sikh minority school, it contributed to the discourse of growing up in an ethnic minority school, and the

impact that the school ethos has on the identity development of the students. Though, more such studies are required in this area.

It is important to note that though there were religious activities at school and the affiliation of the school towards Sikhism was quite obvious to both Sikh and non Sikh students, yet the school didn't impose its religious identity on the students; there was freedom to practice other religions. The school, apart from engaging in Sikh religious festivals and practices, also celebrated Christian and Hindu festivals. Assemblies were held on national integration, secularism and the rich heritage of India. With Sikh dance forms like *Gidda* and *Bhangra*, there was also learning of western dance, mono acting and debates in English. This amalgamation of Sikh religious practices at school and other practices helped students have a more modern outlook.

Though the Sikh students had a discernable Sikh identity, at the same time the non Sikh students were seen to retain their own sense of religious identity. This becomes a lesson for other ethnic minority schools, that in the name of maintaining their minority culture they must not impose their religious affiliation on others.

Another important implication is that the school must not take a moralistic stand on adolescence. Adolescent is a time of exploration, when boys and girls experiment with different roles, interests and lifestyles. It is a time of change and so the school must not moralize in the name of religion and use water tight labels of right and wrong.

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