Through the Looking Glass:
Gender Socialization in a Primary School

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"A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now, _here_, you see, it takes all the running _you_ can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Little beyond biographical and anecdotal material exists to help us understand how children "learn" gender in Indian schools. Textbooks have been the focus of some research attention, primarily directed at uncovering the invisibility of girls and women and gender bias and discrimination in language and thematic content. However, it is important to note that there are values and norms diffused through schools in addition to those of textbooks. The "hidden" curriculum of schooling encompasses, in addition to the messages embodied in textbooks, institutional regularities, rituals and routines, as well as the teaching process itself (Apple, 1979). The concept
of the “hidden” curriculum sensitizes us to the fact that these “unintended practices” also contribute to the child’s understanding of the world, and of gender as a dimension of social relations and social organization in that world.

The patterns of practices within the school which construct femininity and masculinity in everyday school life is the backdrop to the hidden curriculum of gender. These patterns constitute a gender “code” (Macdonald, 1980). The gender code provides the cues for “gender-appropriate” behavior for all social actors within a particular school setting. For the school child, “clueing in” to the gender code involves reading gender into the contexts of social interaction within the school. The child perceives her/his own gender identity in the institutional “sub-world” of the school through the “gender lens” constructed by the common sense practices, routines and rituals of everyday school life. Gender socialization can be thought to occur not by passive imprinting of “accepted” gender norms on unwary subjects, but through the active engagement of children with the gender code of the school.

Empirical evidence is brought to bear on such a conceptualization of socialization in this chapter. Some patterns in the complementary socialization of girls and boys are described here in the context of one primary school. I try to show how, within the specific cultural context of this school, everyday practices and interactions define the contours of the child’s “gendering”. Through description of everyday contexts of school life and children’s responses to these contexts, I attempt to show how the child accommodates to these contours in order to be perceived as a “normal” competent member of her/his gender category.

Children and Teachers

Most of the children in the study were first-generation urban migrants from the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra. Their father’s occupations were vegetable vendors, carpenters, tile “polishers”, truck drivers, factory workers, watchmen and small traders. Most of the mothers did not work outside the home, except for a very few who worked as domestic servants. In almost all cases, both parents had had a few years’ of formal schooling; some mothers
were unschooled. Many children had siblings in the same school or in a private Hindi-medium secondary school nearby; several came from the same or contiguous residential settlements located 2–4 km away. For these children there were close linkages in social interaction within the school and in the proximate neighborhood.

The two classes I observed represent two extreme styles' of teacher-directed classroom management; both, however, were based on the principle of "mob control". The teacher of 4a, Mrs S, was a proud believer in the ideology of the stick. As she hit the children, she would often recite a Gujarati couplet roughly translated as "the more swipes you earn, the better you learn". The 4b teacher, Mrs V, presented a complete contrast. She often admitted that she was "soft" and "felt pity" whenever she "saw the faces of the children". She was the only teacher in the school who did not keep a stick in the room, and actively discouraged any of the monitors from bringing one. She often told me, and the children as well, that she believed that "hitting made children go bad". All the children of her class told me that they liked her best among the teachers because she did not hit them. Interestingly, they also saw this as a weakness, citing it as a reason for the indiscipline in the classroom as well as the lack of "good studies".

Researching these two very different environments seemed impossibly difficult at times:

If the experience of observing 4a with its totalitarian ethos of submission and fear is immensely disquieting, sitting in 4b surrounded by a constant whirl of activity and deafening noise is no less disturbing. In both situations, maintaining the stoic distance of the (un)involved observer creates an empty feeling of helplessness... Shouldn't I be trying to make learning enjoyable and meaningful for these children instead of arduously taking notes about the physical and symbolic violence they are subjected to day after day in school? (Fieldnotes, 14.10.94)

Both teachers told me that "like mothers, they hit and scold" but also give "affection" to the children. Interaction with the male teachers was different for the children, many of whom had had direct experience of them in their village schools where there were "no teachers, only sirs". The two male teachers in the school were feared by the children as being very "kadak" (tough). When any teacher was absent, one of these male teachers would occasionally look in on the class to see, in his words, "if
all was going well". Urgent cues from lookouts stationed in the corridor would usually send the children flying to their places.

Organizational Arrangements

A typical school day commenced with the morning assembly held in the playground. Girls and boys of each class stood in separate rows facing the portico on which six or seven “older” girls of Std. 7 sang “patriotic” songs. A few boys of Std. 6 and 7 “minded” the rows of children at the back. The teachers (eleven female, two male) also stood on the portico talking among themselves while one or two took “turns” to preside over the assembly. The children then went, still in lines, to their classrooms. Lines (especially the boys”) rapidly disintegrated when the teachers were out of view, although children with classrooms on the first floor often had to encounter on the landing a male teacher ready with a stick to ensure order.

“Settling down” before the teachers arrived in the classrooms followed different patterns in the two classes of 4a and 4b. In both classes, the girl monitors arranged the teacher’s “tools of trade” on her table—diary for “lesson plans”, attendance registers, duster, chalk. Floor mats were arranged by the children. In 4a this was done under the watchful eye of the girl monitor who ensured that children were in their “proper places” before the teacher came in; in 4b, there was a lot of playing with the mats—sliding, hitting, swirling—before the entry of the teacher.

Sex segregation was ubiquitous in all organizational arrangements. As mentioned earlier, boys and girls always lined up separately. In the classroom, girls and boys sat separately, an aisle acting as both a physical and symbolic divide between them—a “gender boundary” as it were. Incursions across this boundary were rare, and when they did occur, inevitably based on confrontation: either playful, as when personal belongings were to be reclaimed or to “hit back” when provoked. At times these confrontations were more serious, as when a monitor “crossed over” to chastise an errant child on the other “side”. The motif of “gendered spaces” within the classroom (and playground) pervaded all my observations, as well as children’s interpretations of cross-sex interactions.

All organizational arrangements based on sex segregation are mere administrative conveniences, “surface structures” of the gendered social architecture of the school. They serve, however, to heighten gender
distinctions in everyday school life. A particularly significant arrangement is the listing of girls and boys separately on the class attendance register, a pragmatic means to compile the mandatory sex-wise monthly attendance statistics for the School Board. Roll call is taken separately for girls and boys, and they have to account separately for absentees from their own gender category:

4b Teacher (facing boys): Which boys are absent?
   (A girl stands up and starts calling out the names of the absent girls.
   The girls who sit near her pull her down).
   Girl’s partner: Not us. The boys.
   (....)
   Teacher: OK. Now the girls.

All routines associated with the list of names on the register were likewise done on sex-segregated lines, such as distributing examination papers and report cards, oral examinations, etc. Each of these mundane, commonplace events of everyday classroom life reinforced the sexual division of labor in the classroom: girls did the girls’ “side”, boys did the boys’ “side”.

Sex-segregated routines are encountered every day by (possibly all) children in co-educational schools. As operational systems based on gender differentiation they serve to legitimize gender distinctions and notions of “genderedness” in children. It is important to recognize that through these routines within the social institution of the school, children “experience” gender in a far more formal and ritualized manner than they do at home.

**Sexual Division of Labor in the Classroom**

Yet another mode of legitimation of gender distinctions within the school was the sex-differentiated system of task assignation by teachers. Most of these tasks were assigned to, and carried out, by the more vocal and visible children. These children almost invariably came from relatively better-off backgrounds, as coded by their appearance, and “seriousness” about studies (they were usually those who “top” the class); possibly because of this they were viewed by teachers as being more “responsible”.
Boys
— mind the boys (monitors)
— run errands outside the school
  (bring snacks for teachers,
  things from their houses)
— carry furniture

— serve lunch during mid-day
  meal

Tasks
— mind the girls (monitors)
— clean the classroom, sweep,
  clean the teacher’s table,
  blackboard
— Carry teacher’s registers, etc.,
  to the lockers (entrusted with
  keys)
— take back teacher’s teacups
  after recess
— teach both in teacher’s absence
  and when she’s “busy”
— read aloud lessons
— write questions and answers on
  the board

Girls

The sexual division of labor that underpins differential task assignment
magnifies the gender dichotomy, centering as it does around the notion of
girls as “dutiful daughters” and boys as “roughhousing rogues”. This was
expressed several times by teachers in my interactions with them, as well
as by their labeling patterns in the classroom. Many children, both boys
and girls but mainly boys, expressed confused anguish at not being called
upon to do “work” in the classroom, which would undoubtedly increase
their “visibility” and establish greater standing among, and power over,
peers.

Domestication of girls was achieved through assigning tasks which
Cast them as being dependable, responsible and pliable to adult author-
ity. Closely mirroring patterns of primary socialization, especially in
late childhood (Anandalakshmy, 1994; Dube, 1988; Kanhere, 1989;
Saraswathi & Dutta, 1988), girls were given tasks which restricted their
sphere of responsibility to the closed spaces of the classroom and school
and kept them under the direct tutelage of the teacher (as in “teaching”) while boys were allowed the freedom to leave the school premises.

Areas of responsibility for girls can also be seen to be extensions of
those they experience at home. While initially my observations led to
an almost congratulatory feeling at seeing matriarchy reigning in these
classrooms, with girls at the center of everyday decision-making and
physical (and sometimes symbolic) power and control, it became clear
with the passage of time and greater reflection on the observational data,
that the “power” conferred on the girls “in charge” was an extension of their domestic responsibilities of household and sibling-care.

The girl monitor of 4b, Shanti, was perceived as being “ineffective” by both boys and girls in controlling dharmad (a leitmotif of the cultural “text” of the school, discussed later), whereas Gagan, her counterpart in 4a, was held up by all teachers in the school and by the children of these classes as the “ideal” monitor. The hidden agenda of domestication is brought out in the commentary of one boy:

Our teacher tells the monitor, you are a girl and you can’t keep the class quiet? See Gagan. (Raju, 10; 4b)

Both girls who were monitors were older and physically bigger than the other children, who called them “didi” (elder sister). They were also both the eldest in their families. The “didi’s” role in preserving the “good name” of the class through management of children and her responsibilities in the household as mother’s helpmate and sibling-minder constitutes a sort of “double exposure” of scenes from these two areas of her life:

I sometimes feel like getting another monitor to mind...I teach the whole day here, and then I have to go home and do housework. (Gagan, 12; 4a)

Echoes of primary socialization can also be heard in the narratives of boys entrusted with responsibility:

We get things from the teacher’s house.....
Girls can’t cross roads, they (will) have accident, fall down.
We are more careful, we have “habit”. (Sanjay, 10½; 4a)

Their non-overlapping spaces of power within the classroom were closely guarded by both girls and boys. Although most teacher-assigned tasks were done by a few of the “dependable” children, there appeared to be a common sense understanding that these are spaces shared by all members of each gender category. Children’s perceptions of these distinct gendered spaces were reinforced by the verbal and non-verbal communication patterns of teachers in the classroom which signified the gender divide:

4b. Teacher comes in late after recess. She looks around the room disapprovingly: it is littered with paper and scraps of food.
T: I came late to the class so you would clean it up. (Faces girls) Why haven’t you cleaned it up?
The tragicomedy underlying the dialectics of power in the gendered culture of the classroom is evident in the following description of an ordinary event, the likes of which occur every day:

4b. T (after introducing a lesson) OK, Chandana, you read.
Vasant: T, may I read?
(T ignores him, goes back to her "work". Chandana is barely audible above the noise. The boys are playing and talking among themselves; girls are talking in their "places").
T (looks up from her work, at the boys.)
T (to Rajdeep, who’s sitting on his bench, facing the back of the class): You’ve become impossible.... Smita, come here.
(T gives Smita some roses she’s brought from home for another teacher.)
T (facing girls): She’s reading, and you’re talking...
Mandar, you read.
(Mandar is caught unawares in the middle of a conversation.)
T (to Vasant): You wanted to read?
(Vasant comes to the front and starts reading.
Not a single child is paying attention.... Smita returns from her "errand". She stands near Vasant and peers into his textbook, goes to her own place, brings her own book and opens it to the right page, peers once again to see where he has "reached". She edges him out both physically and by reading louder than him.)
Teacher looks up.
T: Smita, you read. (Gestures Vasant to return to his place.)

Whether teacher-directed or not, the "cues" of the differentiated system were effectively internalized by the children. My interviews with the children were held in an unused classroom for which a bench had to be found everyday. Initially the teachers would tell the boys to find one and bring it in. A few weeks into the interviews and fading from the everyday school reality of teachers, I would often ask the individual child to get one. Only one or two girls apart from the monitors managed to muster the courage to flagrantly violate the gender code and actually be seen carrying a bench; in any case they would almost always be pre-empted by the boys racing around to organize one and self-importantly deliver it. One girl whom I requested to bring in a bench put up passive resistance by going over to the window and looking out silently. I finally asked her to request one of the children from her class to get one. She did not budge. Two boys eventually brought one in. I asked her why she did not get one:
I don’t talk to them...
I’ve never talked to them, that’s why. (Shalini, 8; 4a)

Another girl said, after a boy (her brother) brought a bench in:

(Why didn’t you get it?)
I can’t… Nobody gives… My brother said
he’ll bring it. (Neela, 10; 4a)

All the children told me how the girls are asked to write on the board
because their writing was good (the theme of girls as “neat”). I asked
Vasant, the monitor of 4b what his “work” was:

V: My work is to keep the boys quiet.
(You don’t write on the board?)
V: No. The girls make us write in our books.
(Why?)
V: They don’t let us know (what the teacher has asked them to write.)
They tell us to keep the boys quiet… Teacher says their writing is good.

Although both teachers told me that there were “children”—both boys and
girls—who had good handwriting, it was the girls who were constantly
called up to the board:

4b Teacher is writing a “question paper” on the board.
T (looks around): Who’s writing is good? You,
Chandana, come and write this.

And the ideal norm of good handwriting was a wedge in the gender
divide:

4a T (faces boys): See how nicely the girls have written. Why can’t
you!

Dhammaal: Gender
and Classroom Culture

Dhammaal is a colourful term in the lexicon of the school culture. For
the teacher, dhammaal denoted disruption and transgression of the disci-
plinary code. It also appeared to fracture the vision of the teachers in
seeing their classes as “wholes”, instead of as operationally consisting of girls and boys. Taking them downstairs to play, for example, involved “managing” them differently, since the boys did dhamaat and so needed to be especially watched:

4b Teacher: Let’s take the children to play.
4a Teacher: OK. You take the girls. I’ll take the boys.

Boys were the main perpetrators of dhamaat in the eyes of teachers. The “class sub-text” of my observations reveal a shared contempt for the working-class backgrounds of the children, especially the boys, who were perceived as “rough” and menacing. This perception was primarily directed at them through shrill and strident labeling:

4a Teacher (to a boy): What is the meaning of nikamma?
B: Bekur (useless).
T: Yes, we say, don’t we, this boy is absolutely nikamma, or this thing is absolutely nikamma... .

It was common to hear the teacher of 4b, for all her (genuine) empathy with the children, say to the boys:

You go to work, so you know you don’t need to come to school! Why do you come to school at all?

or, in the context of indiscipline

I’m telling you, one day you’ll kill somebody!

Because of expectations of good behavior, girls were often reminded of ideal norms:

If you behave like this, what will happen to the class? (4b teacher)

and this founds an echo in children’s voices:

The girls are better at studies. Their minds are more powerful. They don’t do dhamaat and they’re smarter. (Dhiraj, 10 1/2; 4a)

All the girls are good at studies. I don’t know why. Teacher says all the girls are good and the boys are zero. (Seema, 10; 4a)

The two classrooms, with their very different cultures, offered strong validation of the pervasiveness of the gender code or “regime” of the school. In 4b, where social interaction was more spontaneous and less teacher-controlled, it was somewhat easier to observe the underlying dynamics of gender. Interestingly in 4a, although children were far more
straitjacketed in their gendered spaces, patterns of interaction and indeed children's perceptions of interactional contexts did not differ from those in 4b.

In 4b, girls appropriated the ideology of "soft" maternalism to extend their power and authority in the classroom. Since the teacher's table was on the girls' "side" of the room, the girls had more opportunities for informal interaction with her. It was common to see girls vying with each other for her attention as they brought her flowers or small objects they had made:

4b Teacher (looks down at the duster, says aloud to herself): This duster is torn.
A girl sitting in the first row: I'll make one and bring (it) tomorrow.

Appropriation of the maternalistic ideology meant that the girls of 4b could do just as they liked, as long as they were careful not to violate the sanctity of spatial equilibrium so essential to being viewed as a "good" class. Extensive industry flourished in all the girl's rows—origami, knitting, crocheting, drawing, etc. There is little doubt that these imaginative subterfuges helped them tackle the boredom of every school day.

In my informal interviews with teachers, it was evident that they subscribed to the "natural theory" of boys' behavior. (The one "nurture" argument they all put forward was that the boys' fathers were often away and did not discipline them.) In 4b the boys were able to accommodate to this ideology of "innate" aggressive masculinity. They engaged in a lot of imaginative body-play—jumping on each other, sparring and kicking. It was common to see boys brandishing weapons at other boys—usually pencils, but also nails, compasses, and even blades, brought from home to seek retributive justice for some earlier attack. The one or two quiet boys would often be teased, especially by the more boisterous ones: "We know you play jun (gambling with cards)—an activity signifying social deviance.

In 4a, under the relentless supervision of teacher and monitors, opportunities for such interaction were limited. Also, since the children were rarely not engaged in studies—meaning writing and more writing—there were limits on time for such "activities". Nonetheless, the limitless capacity for children to maximize fun even in the most adverse circumstances saw them carrying out their little subversions within their immediate environments, without getting out of their "places". Apart from drawing and playing with pencils, rulers and paper, there was talking, teasing and hitting. Most of the children's more "visible" social interactions were
with monitors as they went on their rounds: hitting back at them, swearing at them, and resisting "punishment".

Towards the end of the school year, Shanti, the 4b monitor, resisted "standing up" (which denotes a mantle of authority bestowed by the teacher). This was a public admission of her powerlessness in dealing with the dhammaat of the boys:

Our teacher doesn’t scold, so nobody sits quiet. Even if she does shout, nobody listens. The boys are all haraami...the girls listen, but the boys don’t... They trouble me. They hit me back.

Despite the sanction of the 4a teacher to hit the boys, the monitor of the class had a similar story:

Both boys and girls do dhammaat. (Names them: the male monitors, and three girls.) But the girls...the teacher had hit once so they don’t do, but the boys don’t care...the boys make more noise and don’t listen.

In the eyes of the children, in addition to connoting a violation of the disciplinary code, dhammaat takes on other meanings. The gender sub-text of children’s narratives suggest themes which construct gender in everyday classroom life in which dhammaat plays a prominent role. Children’s interpretations of dhammaat shows its strong association with cross-sex interaction.

All the children told me that it was the boys who did dhammaat and got scolded more by the teachers. “Disobedience” to authority—both the teacher and the monitors—constituted dhammaat in the eyes of children, but it was transgression of the gender boundary that was central to its meaning: Both boys’ and girls’ understandings of dhammaat stressed the sacrosanct rule of spatial equilibrium, which is violated by crossing the gender boundary. For both boys and girls, hitting, pushing, teasing and throwing things across the aisle constituted dhammaat in the classroom; many boys said that by getting "teased", the girls did dhammaat (this was probably because it called for the intervention of the teacher and/or the monitor). Monitors came in for particularly harsh indictment from the children: from the boys, who expressed anger that the girl monitors favored the girls and often played among themselves; and from the girls that the boy monitors "stood up" even when they were not asked to. There was agreement that girls contributed to dhammaat by their talking in the classroom. This perception was possibly conditioned by the teachers’ constant admonition of girls for talking.

Several of the boys said that the girls were better at studies because they did not do dhammaat (some said "readily"!), that they sat "peacefully".
All the boys do dharamsal
(What about you?)
No. I keep sitting. (Rina, 10; 4a)

"Us" and "Them": Cross-sex Interaction in Gendered Spaces

Most of the attitudes and gender "positionings" of school children are carried over from the home. However, the total absence of mixed-sex activities and confinement to non-overlapping gendered physical spaces heightened the "us" and "them" orientation of the children, inhibiting opportunities for, and creating new, institution-based taboos and restrictions on, cross-sex interaction. Analysis of children's observations of peer social interactions revealed this to be the case. All 112 children told me that they only talked and played with same-sex friends. A few children mentioned siblings and neighborhood children as opposite-sex playmates, although most of them did not talk or play with them in school. The themes underlying these narratives reveal continuities between primary and school socialization. Interviews with both boys and girls revealed that they viewed cross-sex interaction within a framework of confrontation, strongly associated with crossing of the gender boundary. Within the larger rubric of dharamsal the distinction between "talk" and "play" is blurred. The most trivial of interactions were seen as "talking" and "playing", such as hitting back at monitors, or retrieving personal belongings from the other "side", and there was criticism of peers for transgressions of what can be considered the disciplinary sub-text of the gender code of the classroom. Peer pressure and disapproval played an important role in maintaining the gender divide within the school:

I don't play with the girls in school...the girls skip and we play catch... My friends say come we'll go there and play. (Sunit, 9; 4a, who plays with a girl from his class everyday in the neighborhood)

I play a lot with Deepu (a classmate who lives nearby)...not at school, because he plays kabaddi...I don't know how to play and my friend (the female monitor) says come let's play something else. (Harsha, 8; 4a)
The indignation of the boys—whom I observed taking up much more physical space on the playground—at girls’ transgression on their gender space in school underlines aspects of male socialization similar to those expressed by Kumar (1986):

(Do you play with the girls?)
What? The boys will say you don’t have shame you’re playing with the girls? (Prakash, 10; 4b)
I play with the girls in my neighborhood, not in school, because the girls come in the way and then we have to leave the place and go somewhere else...what work do girls have in boys’ play!! (Ramesh, 9; 4a)

Strict gender restrictions in group games are maintained, particularly when teacher-organized, but also by the children themselves. Boys and girls admitted to knowing each other’s games, having learned them from siblings, neighborhood children, or, as in the case of boys, watching girls play in the teacher’s absence from the classroom. However, on the playground, playing cross-sex games was simply not done:

In the village school we used to play kabbadi. No one plays here so how can I play alone (with the boys)? (Neeta, 11; 4a)

Parental disapproval and the context of “talk” can be heard in Charu’s (10; 4a) words:

My mother says “Have nothing to do with the boys”.
(What does she mean?)
Don’t do this, don’t do that, and no roaming with them...in school I only talk to boys from my society (neighborhood).
(Who?) Deepu.
(You talk to him?) No. If he hits me only then.
(What do you say?)
My friend who sits next to me says why’re you hitting us?
(You don’t tell him?)
No. I only talk if he hits.
(And the other boys? If they hit?)
No.
(Why?)
I feel shy.

The construction of gendered spaces created a screen which sometimes lifted in the teacher’s absence.
No one from the girls does *dhannaal*... No, some do. I don’t know their names but I’ve seen them when the teacher’s not there. (Govind, 8 1/2; 4a)

I don’t like to play with girls. My mother says don’t play with girls... (You used to play?)

Now I don’t... There’s too much *dhannaal*. When Madam wasn’t there we used to play. (Satyen, 9; 4b)

**Taking “Sides”**

Engendered by sex-segregated practices was the construction of “sides”: a fracture in the social interactions of children which heightened the “otherness” of the opposite gender category. Several children brought up the issue of “sides” in the context of cross-sex interaction:

I don’t know their (the girls’) names. I don’t pay attention to that side, I pay attention to my studies. (Raju, 10; 4a)

Many more children (apart from those she’s mentioned) do *dhannaal*. I don’t know their names...we girls sit on one side, those children, the boys, sit on that side.

(You don’t sit together?)

Madam says “you’ll do too much fighting”, and the boys hit us. (Pooja, 10; 4a)

We don’t look that side. If I go to see, the boys jump on me. (Deepak, 10; 4b)

After Vinay (8 1/2; 4b) was through with his interview I asked him to send in Mariam, one of the girls.

(Has she come?)

I don’t know.

(But you were in the class right now...)

Yes, but I don’t know their names.

(Could you call Shabnam then? Has she come?)

Yes.

(How do you know?)

I saw her in the assembly.

(Do you talk to her?)

No.
(How do you know her name?)
(Impatiently) Madam calls the roll, nu?!

In the classroom, "sides" were constructed so as to minimize dhampaal. Boys' sides were away from the door, which did not really prevent them from running out when restraints were lifted. In a bid to stem the dhampaal in 4b, Shanti, the class monitor, devised along with the teacher, a different pattern of "sides":

The boys used to sit on one side, they'd throw things at the girls, trouble the girls. I thought if I put them in the middle, with girls on both sides, they won't be able to trouble us. And the girls used to sit with their friends and talk, so teacher said change their place.
(And the boys?)
...they've gone back to their own places (next to their friends)...the good boys are still sitting in their new places.
(Which?)
2-3 boys, I don't know their names...the girls' names I know, many of the boys' names I don't...I talk to all of them because I'm the monitor...
Nowadays there isn't much dhampaal because "we" (the girls) can see from both sides.

The reactions to the "new" arrangement of "sides" highlight the association between gender and physical space:

I like it a little, don't like a little.... because the boys hit.
(Earlier?)
We didn't know them earlier, now jaan pechchaun ho gaye (we know them better). (Leena, 10; 4b)
We don't like them next to us, they fall on us.... tomorrow, we'll sit like before, Madam said. (Amandeep, 10)
The girls are hitting the boys and the boys are hitting the girls...they can do more badmaashi now. The teacher can't see three sides, if the girls are on one side and the boys on the other, teachers can see the boys' side. (Manisha, 10)

Girls do dhampaal when the teacher's not there.... sitting like this there's more dhampaal. (Arvind, 12)

Although I did not witness it during my fieldwork in the school, discussions with teachers revealed that desegregation in classrooms is often used as a form of "punishment". This was confirmed by the children:
When Madam's not there, this monitor is very bad, she used to make the girls sit next to the boys, one girl, one boy.  
(Did Madam also?)
No, she doesn't hit...she doesn't make boys and girls sit together...I only like to sit with my girlfriends. (Jaya, 9; 4b)
In the 3rd, we used to do dhamnaal and the teacher used to make us sit one boy one girl, like that. The girls and boys fight together, but more among themselves...when there was more dhamnaal the teacher used to make us sit like that, together...the boys run back to their places, sometimes they do dhamnaal even if they sit like that. (Rita, 10; 4b)

On the playground, an objective of making/taking "sides" was to ensure that boys did not leave the school premises. Children said, as well as gesturally indicated, that the boys' "side" was the one opposite to that of the school gate.

The teacher makes the boys play, we make the girls play.  
(What if you make them all play?)
The girls listen but the boys run off. (Gagan, 12; 4a)
The boys hit the girls. That's why teacher makes them play on that side. If we (the boys) play the teacher has to be there. (Deepu, 10½; 4a)
The teacher makes us play separately on that side. She says she doesn't like.
(What?)
That boys and girls play together. (Shirish, 12; 4b)

The gender divide in the classroom served to keep levels of attrition low and enabled the teacher to get on with her school day. However, within the particular class context of this school, it was also seen as a necessary "stricture" to avoid "trouble" between the sexes in the future:

In... (a private secondary school to which many of the children go), don't ask what sorts of things happen. Here we're very strict, we make sure girls don't get into any trouble. (Principal)

In conversations with me, as well as with their students, the teachers would often say that boys and girls "stay" as brothers and sisters. "Equality" is not the cultural message here: sisters have a subordinate position in the power structure of the family. Rakshabandhan, one of several rituals which emphasize the commitment of brothers to protect their sisters,
and sisters to serve them, was celebrated in the school. Between unrelated females and males, Rakshabandhan grants legitimacy to cross-sex interaction, especially for girls:

There’s one boy, Paresh I talk with him.
(What do you talk about?)
Nothing. Nothing else. My friend and I think of him as a brother. We tied a rakhi on him. (Surma, 9; 4b)

This legitimacy was fragile and not without its contradictions, and girls accommodated to it with canny pragmatism:

Nilesh (a boy monitor) hits a lot, but the teacher still says treat them as brothers. She told the boys to treat the girls as sisters. I treat the boys as brothers. (Amritkaur, 9; 4a)

We think of the boys as brothers. But they hit too much. Then we think: what sort of brothers are they? Then we hit them back. (Shobha, 10; 4a)

Conclusion

I have attempted in this chapter to understand the meanings children give to the interactional contexts arising out of everyday school experiences in terms of gender. These interpretations appear to highlight the continuities between socialization into gender roles within the family/community, and gender socialization through schooling. An important caveat to be kept in mind is that the specificity of relationships within this school, given its particular class culture, defines patterns of gender socialization which may not be found in other “types” of schools. It may not be too far-fetched, however, to imagine, and the literature does appear to suggest (Parthasarathi, 1988) that many girls and boys in Indian coeducational schools would be able to identify—in varying degrees—with some of the voices in this chapter. By looking at an “ethnographic particular”, nonetheless, one can attempt to understand the complex ways in which gender is constructed and interpreted in social institutions like schools. Apart from alerting us to the pervasive presence of gender in the richly textured social experiences of children at school, and constant legitimation of gender distinctions through everyday school practices, the voices heard in this chapter also point to the difficulties in generating theories which
can feed into progressive interventions towards more gender-equitable schooling, one that has emancipatory potential for both girls and boys.

The poet Wilfred Owen, ruling the scientific study of children, is known to have remarked that we can only understand children when we study them for pleasure (Owen & Bell, 1967). It is true that a great deal of enjoyment accompanies listening to children as they speak of their lives at school. However, these narratives have to be placed within the larger framework of gender relations in Indian society. "An infusion of narrative," Bromley reminds us, "[s]tories of real people... bring into relief the complexity of everyday life." (Bromley, 1989). The overlapping of the personal with the social, and the cultural with the political, particularly in relation to normative standards of cross-sex interaction in late childhood, are heard in these children's voices. Underlying these narratives is a discourse which centers on the "value" of schooling, the differential social meanings in being schooled as a girl and as a boy of a particular social class and caste in Indian society, and differential accessibility to codes of power through formal schooling. Our understanding of gender socialization in social institutions like schools cannot afford to ignore the complex ways in which this discourse mediates schooling processes and the structures of knowledge by which the child attempts to understand her/his position in society.

**Glossary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>dharmaveda</th>
<th>uproar</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nikama</td>
<td>worthless, good for nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>josa</td>
<td>gambling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harami</td>
<td>(slang) wicked, base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kabaddi</td>
<td>a game in which each player of a team holds her breath while repeating &quot;kabaddi, kabaddi&quot; in the opposite team's territory, tries to touch one or more opponents there, and has to return to her own side before her breath runs out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rakhi</td>
<td>a protective talisman made of thread and a rosette, tied on brothers' wrists by sisters during the festival of Rakshabandhan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes**

1. This chapter is based on a presentation of preliminary observations from my ongoing doctoral research made at the Symposium on Socialization, Baroda, December 1995. I would like to thank Prof. T.S. Saraswathi for urging me to write this paper, as well as putting up with all sorts of dharmaveda in seeing.
it come to life. I would also like to thank all the symposium participants for their extremely constructive interventions.

2. The data considered here were collected in the course of ethnographic fieldwork in a coeducational municipal primary school of Baroda, Gujarat, over a period of one academic year (1994–95). Participant observation was done in two classes of Standard 4; 112 children (61 girls, 51 boys; mean age: 10 years) belonging to these classes were interviewed towards the end of the study. Observation in these classes and close interaction with the two teachers as well as the children enabled me to get an insider’s (albeit adult’s) view of the everyday social reality of the schoolchild. The names of the children have been changed in this chapter.

References


