
Véronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions: Nation, History, and Language in Contemporary Western India*

Djallal G. Heuzé



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Véronique Bénéï, *Schooling Passions. Nation, History, and Language in Contemporary Western India*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, 368 pages, ISBN: 978-08-0475-906-9 (paperback edition).

Djallal G. Heuzé

[1] *Schooling Passions* by Véronique Bénéï is a very successful attempt at understanding the nation and nationalism through a comprehensive analysis of school and schooling. The study was conducted at the turn of the millennium in Southern Maharashtra, India. The anthropologist studied several types of schools in the busy middle-sized city of Kolhapur, observing the daily life of pupils and teachers. Maharashtra, a large state of about 90 million inhabitants, has had a long and significant encounter with nationalism that remains central in everyday life. Western India thus provides a relevant case study for understanding the intricate relation between schooling practices and nation formation in South Asia.

[2] Dealing with formal education, stability of the state and national integration, the study relies on many relevant 'small things', revealing the centrality of the 'banality of the quotidian process'. The attempt at formulating a phenomenological anthropology of the body and emotions is one of the main axes of the approach and it brings rich dividends. Bodies (of the children, the teachers, the parents), emotions, schools and nation are correlated through a number of practices. The embodiment of national emotion requires a daily labour.

[3] Among the numerous findings, an important set of remarks deals with the interrelated figures of the mother: mother at home, mother mistress, mother goddess and motherland. A complicated and evolving world of feminine representations encompasses the girls' and perhaps even more the boys' schooling. Another level of analysis deals with language: compulsory English, common Hindi and intimate Marathi. The concept of mother tongue is central in the building of national-regional unity, yet the English idiom is spreading rapidly with a concomitant

sense of loss of identity. Besides, songs, prayers, national anthem and religious *mantras* constitute the basis of a recent but resilient 'Maharashtra Dharma' (religion of Maharashtra), which influences schools but which is also a by-product of schools and formal education.

[4] This point is central, since despite repeated attempts by educationists and some authorities to separate 'good patriotism' from 'evil fundamentalism' the borders are everywhere blurred. One of the points that emerge is the existence of a consensus about Shivaji, the former emperor and the mythical founder of 'Maharashtra-ness'. His official legend, that is his history revisited by nationalism and politics of identity in present day Maharashtra, was relatively unaffected by the changes in the politics of the regional government (a Shiv Sena-BJP coalition ruled between 1995 and 2000). In this legend, a mix of myth and history, war is more important than government. A bellicose atmosphere reigns. It is important because Shivaji 'does for good boys what Bharatmata – the nation goddess - does for good girls' (p.157) Indeed, the perceptions of Hindu nationalists, especially the Shiv Sena, about Shivaji, the nation, community at war, conversions to Islam and reconversions to the Hindu fold, do not differ significantly from the common speeches and practices at school (be it private or state owned, progressive or not). The presence of a large and consensual set of 'non *hindutva*' Hindu nationalist beliefs at schools, made up of *bhakti*, *desh*, *dharma*, religious rituals and fascination for the military is highly revealing. Mainstream schools definitely play a part in the communalisation of the nation and Hindu-isation of the nation. Probing further this fundamental point, extending it to the study to *hindutva* institutions, would have brought an interesting comparison by bringing to light the specificities, if any, of the Hindu nationalist current.

[5] The case of Urdu-medium schools (private with public subsidies) however provides an interesting counter-point. These schools, which concern only Muslim pupils, are also a part of the process of community building. Their insistence on Arabic, Quran and Urdu, while Marathi stands almost discarded, delineates the borders of a self-asserting community, a linguistic aspect of building difference and maintaining distinctiveness. Instructions are given for schooling the girls in 'pure Urdu'. Yet, this process of separatism does not tell the whole story. Kolhapur Muslims, through their formal education, stake a claim to the 'grand narrative of the Indian nation', demanding participation in its making. They take tours of the architectural legacy of great Muslim ancestors and express the desire that Kashmir – 'the head of the nation' – remain a part of India.

[6] The last chapters on military schools focus on a highly peculiar aspect of the scene. Scientific temper, polluted atmosphere, so-called modernity and (post) Victorian discipline constitute a striking set-up. The mix of Hindu nationalism, drills and sports, army organisation, national values and convent education appears as an ambiguous reassertion of the martial races 'theory'. English is everywhere because it is the language of discipline. In this male universe, children are taken care of but also deeply oppressed.

[7] These fascinating insights into schools and schooling in present day Maharashtra brings us back to the 'nature' of Hindu nationalism. Hindu right-wing ideology is engulfed in a wide range of practices. The school is a very complex fabric of identification (a term rightly preferred to identities), skills and self-contained bodies. It informs us about the nature of the State and Society. Is Hindu nationalism a by-product of Orientalism, as suggested once? Is it a composite makeshift item? Can it be considered also as an unwanted vestige of English and colonial discipline? The resilience, but also the over-simplification of 'Indian culture' (versus Hindu *sanskriti*), the influence of post-Vivekananda Hinduism and the regional construction of Shivaji are all central elements of school education and fundamental parts of the *hindutva* discourse.

[8] As the author emphasizes, quoting Lyotard's insights that turned out to be prophecy and other 'post-modern' philosophers, these intricate processes reveal the impossibility to discern the end of meta-narratives like nationalism. The nation nevertheless remains prominent in everyday Maharashtra and, as far as I know, the whole of South Asia. To me, this study proves that an essentialised modernity, which is the basis for post-modernist discourses, is a poor theoretical basis. Concerning nationalism, it has been since its inception a complicated matrix and not simply a by-product of modernist ideology.