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Schooling Passions: Nation, History, and Language in Contemporary Western India (Book Review)

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Véronique Benei. *Schooling Passions: Nation, History, and Language in Contemporary Western India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. xix + 346 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5905-2; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5906-9.

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Education, Emotion, and Nationalism

Schooling Passions is an anthropological work that explores the everyday production of local, regional, and national senses of belonging in the elementary schools in the locality of Kolhapur near the southern boundary of the state of Maharashtra, India. Kolhapur was an independent kingdom until 1949 and traces its origin to Shivaji Bhosale, a seventeenth-century hero-warrior who founded the Marathi nation. Equipped with a knowledge of Marathi and significant expertise in nationalism, citizenship, education, and gender, Véronique Benei conducted fieldwork at five schools in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the expectation that education would be less nationalistic there than elsewhere in India owing to its distinctive heritage. She instead found that a sense of regional belonging served as the pillar on which a sense of attachment to the nation stood. Her focus is on banal nationalism, the everyday acts that create and reinforce loyalty to the nation. She necessarily keeps the subject of her work from the teachers, pupils, and parents she observes to avoid artificially provoking such acts. Though much attention is paid to the content of these everyday expressions of nationalism and pupils' reception of that content, the real focus is on the form that its presentation took. Benei works quite successfully to recover "the emotional and embodied production of the political" (p. 5). In this theoretical framework, pedagogical content and form are inseparably intertwined; indeed, regarding young children, the form takes precedence.

The importance accorded to form is apparent in attention to language throughout the book. The first four chapters examine schools in Kolhapur, catering overwhelmingly to Hindus, where instruction took place in

the Marathi language. Teachers at these schools pressed pupils to use *pramanit bhasha* ("the correct, authoritative language") rather than *boli bhasha* ("oral language") in their answers to the teacher, songs, and morning liturgy (p. 94). Benei argues that the notion of *pramanit bhasha* renders meaning secondary to proper pronunciation, which becomes ideological in itself. *Pramanit bhasha* is cultivated through and thus becomes associated with morality stories and expressions of national allegiance. Students are also encouraged to "internalize *pramanit bhasha* [by] naturalizing it as their own *boli bhasha*" (p. 94). This incitement to internalization also demonstrates the way in which the schools' production of nationalism relies on blurring the distinction between public and private as students learn to apply forms learned at school to their personal lives and even, in some cases, to encourage their parents to adopt more nationalistic ways of behaving. Family life also serves as the basis for cultivating a love for nation.

Students encounter the figure of the national mother goddess throughout the day in schools in songs, plays, the morning liturgy, and textbooks. Once a year schools in the city of Kolhapur host a presentation attended by the public, the culmination of which involves a student portraying Mother-India. This embodiment also takes place through other means on a daily level at schools. Pursuing teachers, students, and students' families into the wider community and their homes, Benei demonstrates how "life at school draws upon, and extends, a sensorium constituted in the intimacy of the family" (p. 105). The emotional intimacy of the family, particularly the mother-child relationship, is thus the model for the

emotional attachment of pupils to the nation. This modeling of patriotism on familial relations has the consequence of reproducing patriarchy through “the conflation of ‘good wifehood, good motherhood, and good patriotism’” (p. 122).

In her last two chapters, Benei examines the education in an Urdu-language school in Kolhapur, catering to Muslims, and a military school in Pratinagar, twenty kilometers outside Kolhapur, to offer a comparative perspective that sheds light on Marathi-language schools as well. It becomes apparent that the bonds of attachment to the nation in Urdu schools are not mediated through a sense of regional attachment as they often were in Marathi schools, as evidenced by the lack of attention paid in Urdu schools to Shivaji, hero of the Marathi and Indian nations. Benei explains this discrepancy by arguing that “regional history is framed in anti-Muslim terms,” though she also notes that Indian Muslims are moving to reappropriate some regional histories as Muslim (p. 184). The final chapter debunks many stereotypes about military schools. Far from an agent of national homogenization and stern masculinity, the Pratinagar school worked to make citizens and soldiers through a constant spoken stream of emotional nourishment ex-

pressed in the regional and national vernaculars, as well as English. Benei portrays this military school as coming far closer than Marathi schools to transcending gender.

On the whole, this is a very fine book, though at times the everyday life at schools, which is so wonderfully reconstructed, becomes lost in a sea of heavyhanded recapitulations of cultural theory. Benei consistently draws parallels between the pedagogical goals and processes in the schools of Maharashtra and the goals and processes that historians have described in contexts from around the world, particularly in nineteenth-century Europe. However, where historians have tended to privilege the written content found in textbooks, Benei’s presence as an observer made apparent the role of emotion and embodiment in the making of patriotic citizens. She observes the passion evoked by, and represented in, singing, speaking properly, the sartorial self-fashioning of students and teachers, and bodily comportment during everyday rituals of nationalism—a passion that is in large part lost to the historian. For most historians of education, the reconstruction of emotion and embodiment will involve imagination and speculation. *Schooling Passions* is an excellent guide to such worthwhile work.

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