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# **Exploring the role of India's secondary school compulsory curriculum textbooks in students' national identity constructions in an overseas school**

**M. Habib Qazi and Alison Taysum**

## **Abstract**

This study problematises the contribution of India's school textbooks in students' national identity constructions in an overseas school in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The textbooks construct students' national identity on the concepts of India's secular democracy, colonial resistance and equal citizenship rights. Notwithstanding study participants' ambivalent identification with these ideals, they mostly express confusing identities evincing religious tendencies, gendered beliefs towards women and antipathy for India's neighbouring states. This entails implications for India's national cohesion and students' ability to live in harmony with other communities in the diasporic setting. It also poses risks to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2030.

**Keywords:** Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) textbooks; democracy in India; India's national identity construction in schools; religion and secularism in India

## **Introduction**

Religious, racial and political tensions on international horizons have motivated researchers in recent times to explore the relationship between 'a school-mediated, academy supervised' (Gellner, 1983, p. 15) national education, and students' national identity constructions (Baumfield and Cush, 2017). The school is a key site where national education is implemented to shape schoolchildren's 'national common sense' (DeCillia et al., 1999, p. 156) and it has the potential for exasperating or ameliorating political conflicts (Qazi and Shah, 2019a; b; Qazi, 2020). Children's intellectual vulnerability during school years and power relations with peers and those in authority are two significant factors that afford the ideologue (consider policymakers, textbooks, teachers/administrators) an advantageous position to inculcate schoolchildren into a particular kind of nationalism (Jenks, 2005). Eley and Suny (1996, p. 8) maintain that it is accomplished by employing 'processes of imaginative ideological labor' in schools through discourse practices. In this article, we identify and analyse the dominant national identity discourses that emerge from the compulsory history textbooks of grades IX and X of India's Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Taking a dual perspective, the article also analyses the pedagogical practices involved in the transmission of these ideologies to students in the school located in a diasporic Saudi context. The significance of the study setting is elaborated in the next section.

We commence this project with the awareness that national education has been used in India and Pakistan for the construction and transmission of particular national ideologies for nation-building, and that it cannot be contextualised without situating it in the larger context of the colonial history of South Asia and postcolonial historiography (Kumar, 2001; Nayyar and Salim, 2003; Rosser, 2003; Saigol, 2005). However, its implications in the

overseas Saudi context are an unexplored area. This can be of significant academic interest, particularly in relation to its impact on the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2030 ([www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/)). Therefore, this study explores the role of Social Science and History textbooks for grades IX and X in shaping students' national identities in an overseas private school located in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The study also investigates teachers' responses to these, hence their role in constructing students' national identity in the case school, and students' positions against their teacher-mediated textbook positioning. The guiding questions are: (1) What are the key factors that appear in the Social Science and History textbooks of grades IX and X for constructing India's national identity of students? (2) How do teachers implement them in the case school? (3) How do students respond to these national identity factors and what implications might their responses have in the context of the KSA?

### **Education, national building and the overseas context**

The use of school/textbooks for nation-building/national identity construction is a well-researched area. Several studies, as referred to earlier, have shown the discursive use of national curricula for constituting particular national identities, with the powerful potential to reinforce or downplay political tensions. However, most such studies largely contextualise the politics of education and nation-building in their regional contexts. The focus of this study, however, is an overseas Saudi context. Therefore, we need to present the rationale for this study primarily in terms of the choice of the Saudi expatriate Indian community as context. Thus, we first examine these questions: (i) What are the characteristics of the expatriate Indian community in the KSA? Why are Indian children instructed in India's national curriculum in the KSA? What is the significance of this in relation to other South Asian communities, particularly Pakistani? (iv) What does the previous research indicate about their relations —(a) with each other, (b) with other South Asians and (c) with the indigenous Muslim population? Similarly, another related question is whether any previous research has investigated the situation in schools for expatriate Indians in this context.

The KSA, like its neighbouring GCC countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Oman, is an oil-rich country. The discovery of oil in the 1930s and its subsequent boom in the 1970s attracted a large influx of international immigration, particularly from the South Asian countries (Bel-Air, 2018a). Therefore, all GCC countries have a large Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistan population. In the KSA, Indians—with an estimated population of 2 million alone—make up the largest share of immigrants. Next are Pakistanis and Bangladeshi, at about 1.5 million each (Bel-Air, 2018a). They work as labourers, shepherds, farmers, technicians, teachers, doctors, engineers, IT professionals, chemists and small business owners. The KSA offers only contractual jobs and does not confer citizenship rights to its expatriate population. Hence, apprehension about losing jobs and returning home remains current. Therefore, instead of seeking admission to local Saudi public schools, where education is imparted in the Arabic language, the expatriate communities look for home-based national curriculum school.

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Therefore, instead of seeking admission to local Saudi public schools, where education is imparted in the Arabic language, the expatriate communities look for home-based national curriculum schools. This has resulted in the growth of private Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani schools in most major cities of the KSA. These schools follow the national curricula of their own countries and are often overseen by the respective embassies and consulates (for a list of Indian schools in the KSA, see [www.cbseguess.com/schools/country/saudi-arabia-188~1](http://www.cbseguess.com/schools/country/saudi-arabia-188~1)).

Given the colonial history of India and the resulting postcolonial anxieties ingrained in the partition of India in 1947, which first gave birth to Pakistan and then Bangladesh in 1971, the national curricula of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are embroiled in the politics of 'us' versus 'them' (Kumar, 2001; Rosser, 2003). Burdened by the necessities of nation-building, the central authorities in these countries encouraged the tradition of deploying selective history contents in curricula as 'weapons of mass instruction' (Gatto, 2010, p. 1). Notwithstanding the negative implications of employing education for constituting students' ethnocentric identities, its implication in the Saudi overseas context where Indian and Pakistani communities work and live side by side is manifold. Symbolically, the KSA provides the three expatriate communities with an opportunity to live together in a reincarnated United India. Though their cordial or hostile relationships in the diasporic setting cannot reverse the wheels of history, these have a powerful potential to impact their socio-economic lives, inter alia. It is against this backdrop that this study analyses how India employs its school curriculum to construct students' national identities, with its implications in the context explained.

Interestingly, to the best of our understanding, no other such research study has been carried out in the context of this study. However, two very similar studies have been conducted in the UAE with Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrant schoolchildren. As explained earlier, like the KSA, the UAE also hosts large Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani populations, with an estimated 700,000, 2,600,000 and 1,200,000 immigrant workers, respectively (Bel-Air, 2018b, p. 12). Like the KSA, these countries also offer home-based national education to their children in the UAE for the same reasons. The first research 'identifies factors shaping Bangladesh's national identity in the textbook discourses and discusses students' experiences of these in an overseas school' located in the UAE (Qazi and Shah, 2019b, p. 1). The study findings suggest that Bangladesh's national curriculum textbooks constitute students' national identities by projecting both external and internal others. Given Bangladesh's Liberation War with Pakistan in 1971, Pakistan fits in the former category. In contrast, those elements that supported Pakistan from within the then West Pakistan (now Bangladesh) fit into the latter category. The other study was conducted in a Pakistani school in a similar setting. It notes the use of Pakistan's national curriculum discourses for constituting students' strong 'anti-India and anti-Hindu' Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools. (Qazi and Shah, 2019a, p. 290) national identities, mainly using the religion of Islam as a tool. The study suggests how this education can subvert the possibility of 'international peaceful coexistence' (Qazi and Shah, 2019a, p. 290) and the relationship between Pakistani and Indian communities living in the UAE.

The absence of any research work in this context, therefore, makes it a compelling case to critically analyse how India employs its school curriculum to construct students' national identities, and specifically its likely implications in the context of the KSA, where such a large number of Indians and Pakistanis have been living together since the 1970s. Though the researchers have the realisation that it would have been more appropriate to conduct this study in the UAE, the logistics issues involved made them put the project on standby.

### **National identity—colonialism, gender and religion**

The notions of colonialism, religion and gender emerge as strong national identity constructs from the study of the sampled textbooks. Therefore, it is appropriate to take a brief look at how these concepts have been used in the context of international education to constitute students' national identities. The termination of colonial powers' physical presence in a region does not suggest the end of colonialism per se. Hall's (1996) question 'when was "the postcolonial"?' (p. 242) develops from this concern and is based on his study of the pervasive nature of colonial systems. He argues that colonised societies continue to live under the grim economic, political and psychological effects of colonialism long after its physical end. Postcolonial societies, therefore, attempt to neutralise these effects by employing different means. A national curriculum is one such potential site, which has been employed to do that internationally (Shizha, 2013; Barongo-Muweke, 2016).

Durkheim (1995) suggests the potential of religion 'to unite into one single moral community' (p. 45), and does nationalism by employing cultural symbols. Similarly, Hayes (1960) states that both religion and nationalism are social phenomena that shape national commonsense (p. 165). School education has been employed in numerous settings to create religious identities for the project of a particular nation-building. Some recent notable examples include the studies conducted by Harari (2018) and Qazi and Shah (2019a,b).

Similarly, gender is an important national identity signifier. Walby (1996) believes that the relationship between gender and nation identity is dynamic and mutually constitutive. Similarly, Eley and Suny (1996) argue that historically, females are imagined as mothers of the nation with the expectation to transfer existing cultural values to the next generation. In this sense, they happen to reproduce patriarchy (see also Yuval and Anthias, 1989). Since the second wave of feminism, education-system actors have become conscious of gender stereotyping and women's under-representation in curricula (Brunell and Burkett, 2019). Despite this realisation, school textbooks in many parts of the world still under-represent women and reinforce gendered stereotypes (Chege, 2006). The insights provided by these studies can offer a vantage point to see how the sampled textbooks employ these notions to constitute India's national identity of students in schools.

### **Methodology and data analysis**

This qualitative research study presents two sets of data in relation to the research questions. The first research question aims to identify factors in the textbooks for grades IX and X that shape students' national identity of India in schools.

There are four Social Science and History textbooks taught in grades IX and X: (a) Democratic Politics I: Textbook in Political Science for Class IX (Book 1); (b) Democratic Politics II: Textbook in Political Science for Class X (Book 2); (c) India and the Contemporary World I: Textbook in History for Class IX (Book 3); and (d) India and the Contemporary World II: Textbook in History for Class X (Book 4). These textbooks were selected for their status as compulsory subjects and the role they play in students' nation-building. Equally, these textbooks are taught in schools affiliated with the CBSE, following the curriculum prescribed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

The NCERT is an apex resource public organisation with the authority to advise/assist central and state governments in India on academic matters related to schools (NCERT, 2019). There are 20,299 schools under its jurisdiction within India, and 220 schools in 25 foreign countries including the KSA and the UAE. Its courses are also offered in more than '1123 Kendriya Vidyalayas [central schools], 2953 Government/Aided Schools, 15837 Independent Schools, 592 Jawahar Novo- daya Vidyalayas and 14 Central Tibetan Schools' (<http://cbse.nic.in/newsite/aboutcbse.html>). This makes the CBSE one of the largest school boards in India. The CBSE is responsible for the publication and provision of the textbooks this study selected for evaluation.

To analyse the textbooks, repeated close reading of the textual material—including illustrations—was conducted. In view of emerging thematic categories from these resources, Saumure and Given's (2008) advice on the process of thematic analysis was followed. It involves listing every bit of information that is relevant to the research theme and then clustering it under broad meaningful categories. This led to the further study of these categories and coding/sub-coding of consistently emerging patterns/themes from the data. In coding/sub-coding data, I followed the principle of integration and aggregation of those individual bits of information that were similar in meaning/connotation (Given, 2008). Then, by putting together the coded/sub-coded data, new thematic categories were created. These were collated and are presented in the next section, under the themes of democracy vs. dictatorship, anti-colonial movement and emergence of Indian nationalism, gender and religion.

In the light of identified themes, it was deemed essential to conduct a field study with teachers and students to analyse the social/pedagogical practices of these textbooks in schools (see questions 2 and 3). Thus, the study was carried out in an international Indian school in the KSA. The rationale for the selection of the overseas context has been discussed in the previous section. The selected school mostly caters to the Indian middle class, comprised of doctors, engineers, IT professionals, chemists and small business owners. Its annual fee ranges from \$778 to \$1,103. The school is sex-segregated and had a population of 380 girls and 450 boys (98% Indian) at the time of data collection in April 2018, studying from kindergarten to grade XII. For research questions 2 and 3, all the students of grades IX and X, and all the teachers teaching them the sampled subjects in the school were selected. The entire Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools teacher population, teaching the aforementioned subjects, at grades IX

and X, included two males and three females. In terms of religious beliefs, three of them were Muslims, one Hindu and one Christian. All had a Master's degree in social sciences and their teaching experience ranged from 7 to 11 years. They were interviewed, using an open-ended/semi-structured interview method. In view of the emerging themes, as listed above, the thrust of the interview questionnaire was essentially the representation of India's national identity foundations, religions and females in the sampled textbooks.

The overarching idea was to learn the teachers' positions on these. Similarly, we also wanted to analyse their approach in terms of inclusion/exclusion when imagining India's national identity. The latter aspect was particularly critical, as this was likely to have the potential to influence students' worldviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the English language, which was the medium of classroom instructions and general communication in the school. Since we used an open-ended interview guide, the length of the interviews varied, allowing for follow-up questions, clarifications and elaborations. Three teachers spoke for about an hour each, whereas two of them for an hour and 15 minutes. Following this, the students' perspectives were collected using interviews as well as participatory tools (i.e. mapping or drawing a cultural tree to represent their preferences/likes or dislikes; Punch, 2002). In O'Kane's (2008) opinion, participatory tool techniques 'can enable children and young people to talk about the sorts of issues that affect them' (pp. 126– 127). The student participants included 32 girls and 30 boys, and the selection criteria considered their years/levels of study (i.e. grades IX and X). Before the study was conducted, students' and their parents' informed consent was sought following BERA (2011) guidelines.

Though most of the sampled population appeared to be Muslim (66%), they represented 13 Indian states with vast linguistic variations. The interviews were conducted in writing in the English language using an open-ended interview questionnaire. It had 9 questions in all, and for each question, the space of half an A4-size page was provided. The students were free to write more if they needed to. The time allowed was one and a half hours, however, the activity was completed in about an hour in each class. For the thematic analysis of the data, the same principle as used in the case of textbook data, described above, was followed. Though this study is mainly qualitative, exploring factors in the textbooks that constitute Indian students' national identity in schools, it also has a quantitative element. This mainly figures in the analysis of students' participatory data, which involved the study participants labelling each tree branch with an attribute that represented India's democracy. Similarly, the data also included the characteristics that the participants assigned to an ideal Indian girl.

To present this data, we decided to use both the number and percentage system. For example, if 18 boys and 19 girls believed that it was 'secularism' that represented India, we calculated it using the formula 'number of girl/boy students using attribute divided by the total number of girl/boy participants times 100'. The worth of qualitative research is evaluated based on its trustworthiness, which can be measured on the criteria of transferability and confirmability of research findings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The former involves describing the phenomenon in sufficient detail and the latter drawing research findings on participants' responses, rather than the researcher's interests. We followed both.

The present section describes all the steps taken during the study and presents the rationale for the use of multiple data to study the phenomenon. Similarly, we have also drawn on the participants' perspectives to explore and understand their perspectives. Our findings based on both data sets are consistent. Hence, we believe that this research meets the criteria of trustworthiness.

## **Findings**

In the following subsections we substantiate the emerging themes, as discussed above, from the textbook data. Also, we will present our findings drawn from the teachers' and the students' data under the identified textbook themes.

### **Democracy vs. dictatorship**

The story of Indian democracy emerges as a significant theme from the study of all sampled textbooks. It has three mutually corresponding facets: India and the world; India, democracy and dictatorship; and India and its secular constitution.

First, section 1 of both Books 1 and 3 relates the stories of the French and Russian Revolutions. In this context, Book 1 explains how Indian people responded to the ideas of liberty, freedom, equality and citizenship that had emerged as a result of the French Revolution: 'the colonised people [of India] reworked the ideas of freedom from bondage into their movements to create a sovereign nation-state' (Book 1, p. 24). Similarly, in the context of the Russian Revolution of 1917, it states how the revolution inspired political movements that 'by the mid 1920s the Communist Party was formed in India' (p. 46). In contrast, the book condemns Nazi ideology, recording Gandhi's warning to Hitler: 'you are leaving no legacy to your people of which they would feel proud' (Book 3, p. 73).

Second, chapter 2 of Book 1 (pp. 2–21) portrays a benign image of democratic leaders and a bad image of dictators. This affords the students a vantage point to compare democracy with dictatorship. For example, Chile's Allende is represented as a leader who helped 'the poor and the workers' and his policy decision included 'reform of the education system, free milk for children and redistribution of land to the landless farmers' (p. 3). Pinochet, Chile's dictator, in contrast, is presented as a cold-blooded leader who tortured and killed 3,000 people (p. 3). Other dictatorships that the books condemn include those of Pakistan and the KSA (Book 1, p. 17), Nepal and Bolivia (Book 2, pp. 57–70), and the USA for its role in Iraq (Book 1, p. 17). These stories aim to convey to the students 'what it means to experience democracy and its absence' (p. 2).

Third, the textbooks highlight the scope a parliamentary democracy can offer in accommodating people's linguistic, religious and regional differences. For instance, chapters 2 and 3 in Book 2 (pp. 13–56) describe the communal riots that occurred at the time of the partition of India as 'a traumatic experience for the people of India and Pakistan' (p. 45). Chapter 3 then explains how Indian democracy has responded to this challenge by constitutionally declaring 'no official religion for the Indian state...[and allowing] all individuals and communities freedom to profess, practice and propagate any religion, or not to follow any' (pp. 48–49).



Defining the Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools Constitution, Book 4 presents India as a democratic republic that is sovereign, social-ist and secular (p. 50). Taking into consideration the textbook story of the emergence of India's parliamentary democracy, as discussed above, the participating teachers (T1–T5) were first asked: 'what do you emphasise when you aim to inculcate Indian nationalism into students?' Selected excerpts from their conversations are as follows:

T1: I teach my students to have faith in the Indian Constitution giving practical examples as to how it gives equal rights to all its citizens.

T2: I tell them about India's diverse culture having so many languages and religions ... I tell them to respect all of them for the unity of the country.

T3: I teach them about the need to stand for the freedom of speech and the free media if they want to see their country on the path of democracy.

T4: Indian Constitution gives equal rights to all the citizens and I emphasise this aspect in class.

However, when asked if they encourage classroom discussions on the practices of the stated democratic ideals in Indian society, all five teachers responded in the negative. They justified their disinterest in such an attempt on two grounds: (i) administrative instructions to stick to examination guidelines stipulated by the CBSE board; and (ii) a dearth of time given the bulk of the syllabus that needs to be covered for exams.

The students' responses concerning the theme of Indian democracy mainly reflected their confidence in the Indian Constitution. As many as 23 boys (79%) and 26 girls (81%) deemed it a modern document that carries forward the wisdom/spirit of ancient India, the French Revolution and Russian Socialism. When asked to list things that make them proud of India, 18 boys (57%) and 19 girls (59%) included the following expressions in their accounts: secular democracy; freedom of expression; cultural diversity; Indian cultural heritage and multilingualism. They expressed similar ideas in their participatory tools images of India's cultural tree, as shown in Figure 1.

Notwithstanding the majority of students' overall confidence in India's secular democracy and cultural diversity, as noted above, 25 (78%) girls and 15 (52%) boys wished to permanently settle in a western country in the future (see discussion).

### **Anti-colonial movement and the emergence of Indian nationalism**

Anti-colonial discourses cover up a vast expanse of both Books 3 and 4. In this context, they focus on the British ways of exploiting the 'natives' and the latter's resistance on different grounds, including physical, ideological and philosophical.

Book 3, chapter 4 (pp. 77–107) dwells on the British exploitation of local forest societies; how they destroyed them by cutting down trees on a massive scale to be 'exported from India' (p. 80) and to construct railway lines which 'were essential for colonial trade and for the movement of imperial troops' (p. 80).

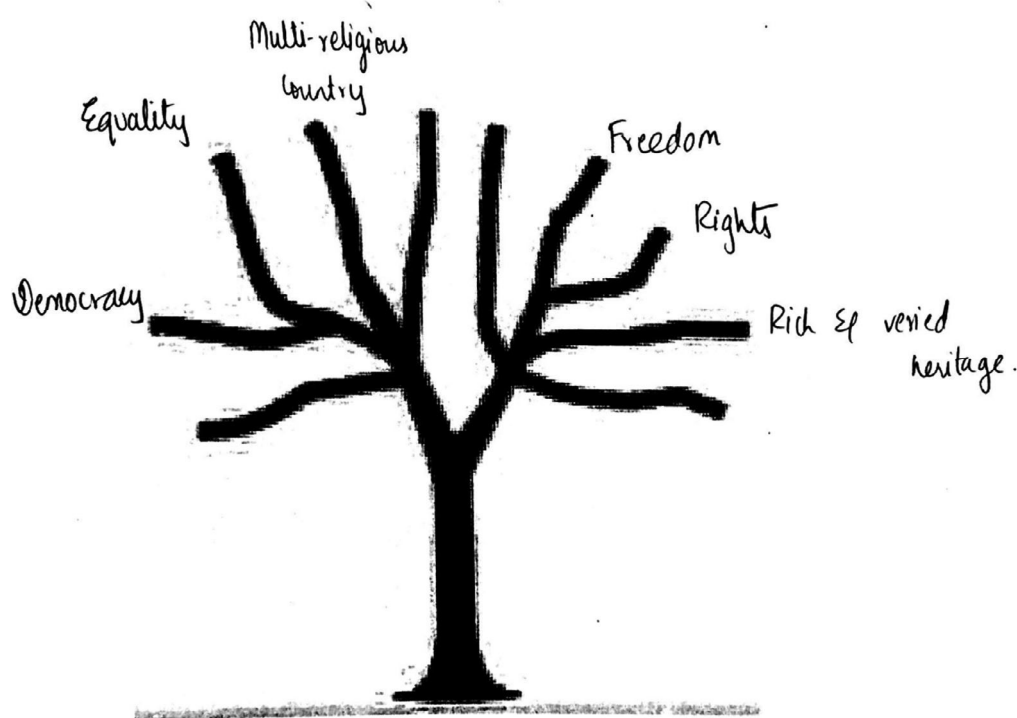


Figure 1. Students' ideas of what represents India.

Criticising the hunting sports of the colonial rulers, a subsection of chapter 4 renders: 'under colonial rule, the scale of hunting increased to such an extent that various species became almost extinct' (p. 87). Another subsection of the same chapter (pp. 104–107) provides an account of the destruction of India's pastoral life under colonial rule. Book 4 highlights the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, during which hundreds of Indians were killed on General Dyer's orders (p. 56). The loss of the 'native' culture under the influence of colonisation is discussed in chapter 8 (pp. 159–178). Chapter 6 (pp. 117–138) chronicles how the British, after conquering Bengal, lured the peasants into 'producing opium' (p. 134) in the 1870s to be sold to China.

With this backdrop, Books 3 and 4 present India as a country that rejected British colonialism in all its forms (physical, philosophical and political) and fought against it from its outset. Tales of Indian people showing physical resistance to British colonisers cover the entire section 2 of Book 3 (pp. 75–138), including stories of forest dwellers' armed movement (p. 90) and pastoralists' resistance (p. 107). On philosophical grounds, Book 3 condemns colonial branding of non-western histories as 'frozen in time... motionless and static' (p. v), and the western portrayal of Eastern, African and South American people as 'traditional, lazy, superstitious and resistant to change' (p. v). It emphasises that they have made as much contribution to the development of this world as the west. This is exemplified in Book 3 (pp. 139–178), which presents stories of how fashions, food, music, literature and sports evolved in different parts of the world. It suggests the dangers involved in seeing things in isolation. Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas

schools following a Eurocentric approach/narrative of progress. To restore the confidence of students in the local culture, an image on p. 160 of Book 3 makes fun of a man who copies western outfits and claims to be a patriot (Figure 2).

Book 4, chapter 4 (pp. 77–102) offers a holistic picture of India's mass political anti-colonial struggle, which brought an end to the British Raj. It epitomises Mahatma Gandhi as a statesman who led the freedom movement built upon the idea of Satyagraha (non-violent passive resistance) (pp. 55–56). Interestingly, it acknowledges the events that led to the loss of Indian Muslims' faith in the Indian National Congress and holds the Indian National Congress responsible for alienating Muslims (p. 68).

Absolving Jinnah (Pakistan's founding father) for the responsibility of partition, the book maintains 'Jinnah, one of the leaders of the Muslim League, was willing to give up the demand of separate electorates if Muslims were assured reserved seats in the Central Assembly' (p. 69). However, it states: 'M.R. Jayakar of the Hindu Mahasabha strongly opposed efforts at compromise' (p. 69). These discourses can help not let a large section of Indian society nurture negative feelings against Muslims and Pakistan.

The findings drawn from the teachers' and students' field data reveal their strong identification with the textbook theme of India's anti-colonial movement. A male teacher (T2) maintained that he would spend quality time in class highlighting the loss of Indian culture under colonial rule and the 'evils' it brought to the Indian subcontinent. One female teacher held that 'India's freedom struggle' made her proud of India as 'Muslims and Hindus fought shoulder to shoulder against the British' (T5).



**Fig. 12 – Cartoon, 'The Modern Patriot', by Gaganendranath Tagore, early twentieth century. A sarcastic picture of a foolish man who copies western dress but claims to love his motherland with all his heart. The pot-bellied man with cigarette and Western clothes was ridiculed in many cartoons of the time.**

Figure 2. Images of people 'foolishly' copying western dress. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wiley onlinelibrary.com](http://wiley.onlinelibrary.com)]

T1 held that he had always taught his students not to discriminate on a religious basis as it was not a 'sound base for national identity'. All teachers told the researchers that they inculcate into students the importance of India's Independence Day as a very proud moment in their history.

In line with these teaching practices in school, 22 boys (75%) and 22 girls (66%) declared India's Independence Day and struggle for freedom as the proudest moment for them. As many as 5 boys and 6 girls also expressed their strong identification with Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha. Responding to a question about the partition of India, 23 girls (72%) and 24 boys (80%) held that the partition of India was a bad move as it divided the country on a religious basis. Similarly, they believed that it led to countless deaths, divided/displaced families and made India and Pakistan permanent enemies. One girl held that 'if there was no partition, they [India and Pakistan] would not fight for Kashmir' (G9). A boy participant regretted the partition, arguing 'Muslims in India are now labelled as Pakistanis' (B12), suggesting Muslims were no longer trusted in India. However, 4 girls and 2 boys appreciated the partition on varied accounts. For example, one girl argued that 'it was a good thing to do as it would have happened at some point as people would not have been united... the country would have collapsed from within' (G11); a boy maintained 'bad people got separated' (B10), reflecting his ethnocentricity towards Pakistan. As many as 5 girls and 2 boys opted not to respond to the question of partition, holding that they did not like to discuss politics.

When students were asked who they thought was responsible for partition, varied responses emerged. Amongst boys, 6 (20%) blamed it solely on the British and their divide-and-rule policies; 12 (40%) held Jinnah responsible; 2 (7%) British and Jinnah together; 7 (23%) India's people and politicians; and 5 (17%) blamed it on the people of India as they gave priority to their religious beliefs. 1 student opted not to answer this question. The girl participants' responses were even more varied, as 11 (34%) of them blamed it on the short-sightedness of the people of India; 5 (16%) on those to whom their religion is very important; 10 (31%) held both Jinnah and Nehru and the leadership of India and Pakistan responsible; and 7 (22%) only Jinnah. 2 girls (6%) opted not to respond to this question.

Intriguingly, when students were asked if there is any country in the Indian neighbourhood which they particularly did not like, 18 girls (56%) were found antipathical towards Pakistan for its involvement in Kashmir and the wars with India, 3 (9%) towards China and 7 (22%) towards Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh for a variety of reasons. The data collected from boy participants showed similar trends, as 19 (63%) of them indicated their dislike for Pakistan and 4 (13%) for China. The rest pointed to Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar. 3 girls and 4 boys opted not to answer this question.

### **Gender**

Gender emerges as another significant national identity signifier from the textbook data. Book 2, chapter 4 (pp. 39–56) presents India as 'still [a] male-dominated patriarchal society' (p. 42). It is a place where 'women face disadvantage, discrimination

Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools and oppression in various ways' (p. 42). It recognises the gendered ways of girls' upbringing in India, which is then reflected in the sexual division of labour, where boys are expected to work outside the home and girls inside. Similarly, it relates the low female literacy rate (54% compared to 76% for males) and their disproportionate political representation in the legislature. Chapter 4 represents international feminist movements in a positive light and gives detail as to how these have 'helped to improve women's role in public life' (p. 41). With this backdrop, the chapter highlights India's Equal Remuneration Act (1976), which requires 'equal wages should be paid to equal work' (p.43). A cartoon image of an 'ideal woman', inviting students to discuss how far they agree with the ideas presented in it, allows students an opportunity to discuss a sensitive topic (Figure 3).

On the issue of gender, all five teachers believed that Indian society is discriminatory, exploitative and patriarchal towards women. Similarly, two teachers (T3 and T5) believed that the caste system was still strongly grounded in India. On probing if they educate students on these social issues, the male teachers were found silent.

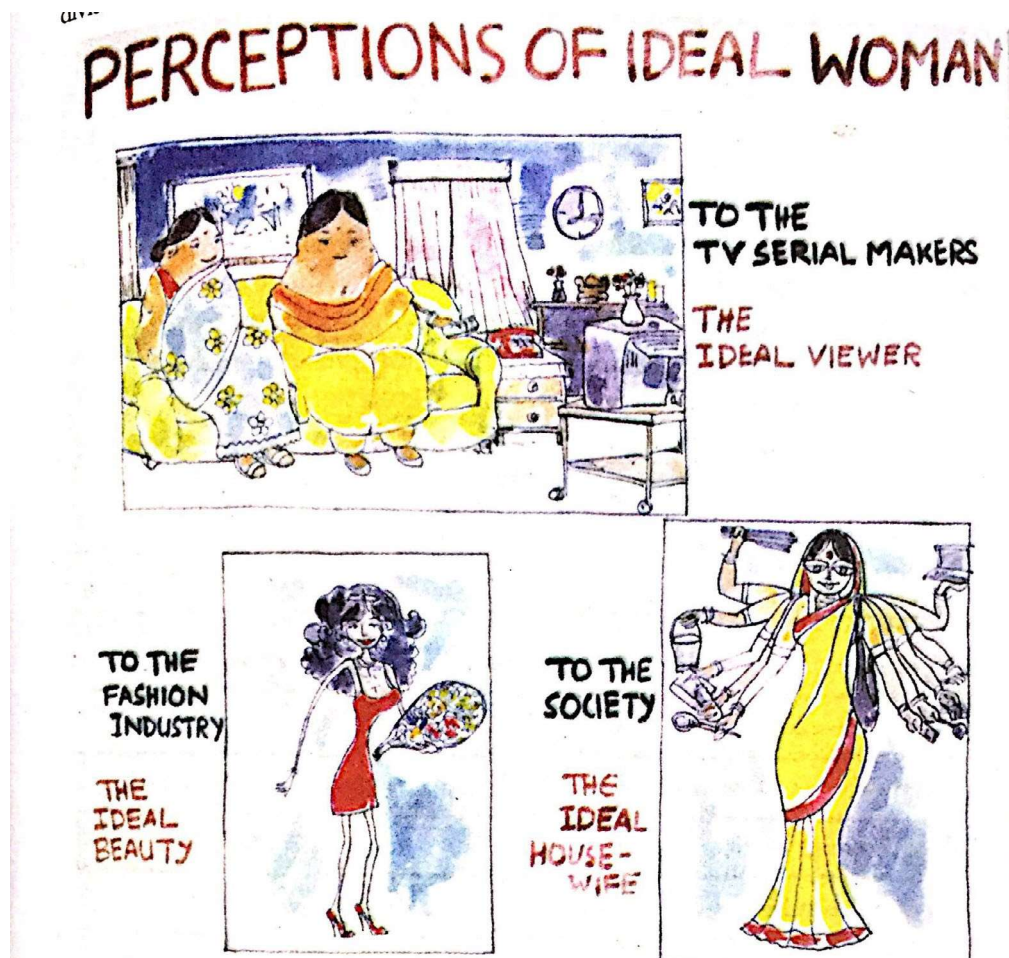


Figure 3. Images of an 'ideal woman'. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Two female teachers, however, stated that they highlight these issues in class and educate children on them. T4 further added that she even created short skits to be performed in class to demonstrate in what different ways she was discriminated against/exploited in the name of Indian tradition.

Contrary to the teaching practices in school, the male students' data unravel their tendency for gender stereotyping and a patriarchal outlook. For example, 12 boys (41%) wanted girls to be obedient to family patriarchs and to respect Indian family traditions, including appropriate dress; 7 (21%) considered 'loyalty' to husband and having 'good character' the most prized values amongst Indian females. Similarly, 5 boys (17%) considered homemaking strictly a female business (see Figure 3). Interestingly, however, almost all boys were found to be in favour of girls being educated and career-oriented. When asked how these ideas affect the decisions they make in their daily lives, most boys maintained that they liked to see their sisters attending school/college and doing well in their studies (Figure 4).

In contrast, a study of the girls' participatory tools data showed that most of them did not view themselves from patriarchal perspectives. 23 girls (72%) considered the characteristics of being educated, independent, competitive, equal and free essential for an ideal Indian girl. Interestingly, 9 of them (28%) also considered being pious, religious, traditional and dressed in 'appropriate' outfits essential for an ideal Indian girl. This reflects the strength of patriarchal/religious culture in Indian communities, where the female is not only a victim but also a contributor to the existing patriarchal values (Figure 5).

### Religion

The textbooks construct students' secular national identity of India. Book 2, chapter 4 (pp. 39–56) presents India as a country which has no official religion and highlights the dangers involved in invoking religion as a basis of nationalism (p. 47). Chapter 4 dismisses the idea of religion being the principal basis of a social community. Citing the examples of Northern Ireland and the Hindus and Muslims of India, it explains Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools how people belonging to the same religion 'can have serious differences about the way people practice religion' (p. 46).

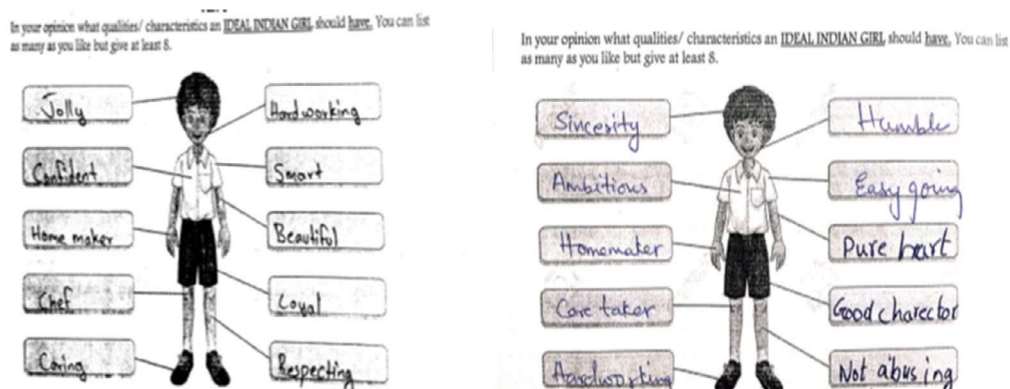


Figure 4. Boys' images of an ideal Indian girl. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



FIGURE 5  
In your opinion what qualities/ characteristics an IDEAL INDIAN GIRL should have. You can list as many as you like but give at least 8.

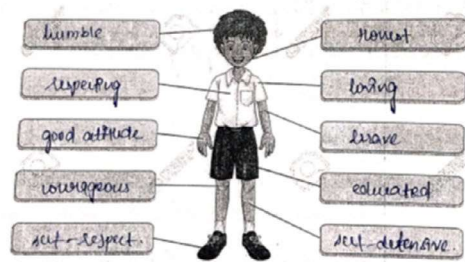


FIGURE 6  
In your opinion what qualities/ characteristics an IDEAL INDIAN GIRL should have. You can list as many as you like but give at least 8.

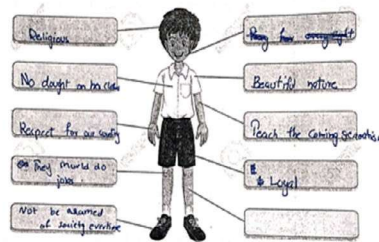


Figure 5. Girls' images of an ideal Indian girl. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

The book explains, with examples of how family laws of all religions are discriminatory towards women. The book presents the religiously driven communal violence of 1947 as the worst case in history, arguing that 'India and Pakistan suffered some of the worst communal riots at the time of the partition' (p. 48). To invoke pathos, it quotes a Pakistani poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, using a blood-stained image on p. 48 (Figure 6).

Notwithstanding the textbook projection of India as a secular country, most teachers evinced their dissatisfaction with the idea of religious freedom in India. They argued that though India is constitutionally secular, it is practically religious. One male (T1) and one female (T4) teacher maintained that religious freedom was 'limited' and 'selective' in India. The male teacher (T1) also pointed to the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 by 'Hindu fanatics' (T1). The female teacher maintained that the religiously motivated anti-Muslim 'riots in Gujrat in 2002' is a stigma on the face of India's multiculturalism (T4).

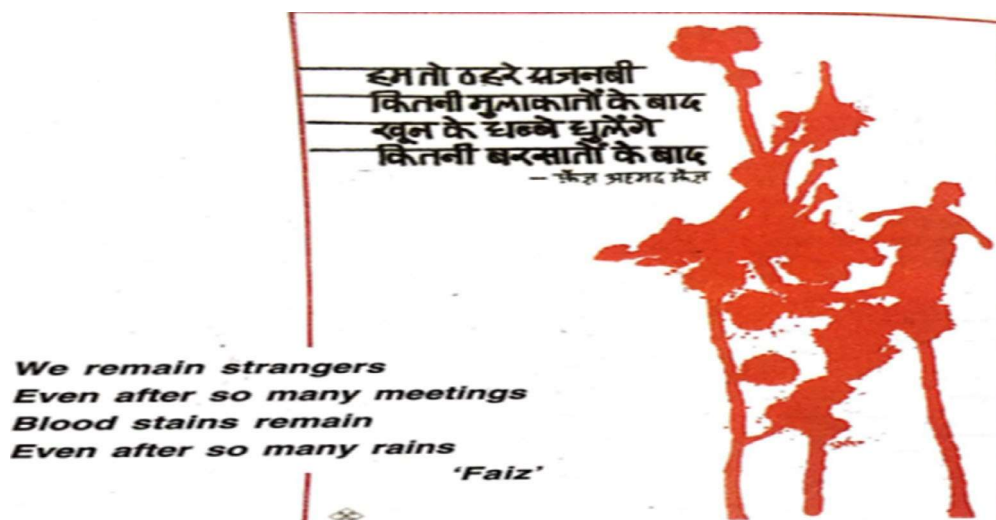


Figure 6. Image of Pakistani poet Faiz's poetic verses depicting the agony of partition. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

When the teachers were asked how they taught religion/s in class, all of them maintained that, given its problematic nature which could seriously affect the school's environment, they usually preferred going over the textbook pages and reinforcing the textbook discourses without encouraging discussion. The sensitivity also involves the context of this study (i.e. the KSA, inter alia).

Another interesting finding was that although the textbooks reject religion as a basis of national identity, it emerged as a strong identity symbol from students' and teachers' data. Of the five teachers, four rated religion first and country second on a scale of 1–4, other symbols being ethnicity and language. When asked why they eschewed discussions on religion in class when they had prioritised it above all other identity signifiers, their responses suggested that they considered it a private/personal issue. Religion emerged as the strongest identity marker from both boys' and girls' data. 20 girls (63%) rated religion first and country second, whereas 21 boys (69%) rated religion first and country second. Only 5 girls (16%) and 3 boys (10%) rated country first. 3 boys (10%) and 3 girls (9%) opted not to respond to this question. In the discussion section, this aspect is problematised in the context of the location of this study and its implications. Interestingly, the idea of religious discrimination also emerged as a strong construct when students were asked what, in their opinion, is embarrassing about India. As many as 13 boys (45%) and 7 (22%) girls included religious discrimination and racism in this list. These examples stand contrary to the findings that show students' confidence in Indian democracy. In contrast, this can be due to either the practical awareness of the situation in contemporary India or the influence of print/electronic media.

## **Discussion**

This study problematised how India's compulsory CBSE national curriculum textbooks construct students' national identity, taking up a case in an overseas context. Through direct data, collected from a school located in the KSA, the study also sought to understand how the teachers implement these discourses on the students and how they position themselves against their teacher-mediated textbook positioning. In this section, we discuss our findings, keeping in view the thematic arrangement of the study.

### **Democracy vs. dictatorship**

To explain the case of Indian democracy, the textbooks present dissimilar ideologies, including the bloody Russian Revolution and the ideas which took root as a result of the French Revolution. Interestingly, it is presented to the students as having stemmed from all the above-stated ideas that India reworked to accommodate/embrace its vast linguistic, religious, cultural and social difference. The textbooks then feature these examples as regular elections, constitutional protection of multilingualism, women's rights and secularism with no official religion, etc. as the practice of democracy in India. In contrast, the condemnation and approval of handpicked dictatorial and democratic regimes to offer a patina of neutrality looks discursive.

Given Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools India's size and socio-political dynamics (25 states and 7 territories with 1,500 languages and hundreds of religions—see Books 1 and 2), the current projection of



Indian democracy in the textbooks can serve numerous functions, including containing the possibility of internal social othering in the society. Having constructed these concepts under the teachers' supervision—who were found to be mostly reinforcing textbook ideas—the students' responses reflected a great degree of conundrum. Some of them appeared positive about India's secular democracy, whereas the majority of them wished to settle down outside India. There can be myriad reasons for such an approach, including economic, political and religious. However, it seems to suggest their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in the home country.

### **Anti-colonial movement**

The textbooks' rejection of colonialism on philosophical grounds, coupled with the stories of physical/political resistance against the British, proved convincing for both teachers and students alike. The teachers reinforced the textbook-based anti-colonial discourses, which similarly emerged as evincing strong anti-colonial sentiments. In the absence of any critical discussion, no student seemed to have an idea of the practical changes that impacted the lives of common people in the postcolonial scenario. Nevertheless, such discourses can serve the purpose of restoring students' confidence in the native culture, and this can be the underlying motive behind these.

However, an interesting aspect that emerged in this context was that though the textbooks do not demonise Pakistan/Pakistani leadership in their discourses, still several students were shown to evince strong negative sentiments. Two contradictory trends appeared to be working in parallel: (a) the students identify with the anti-colonial discourses that condemn religiously driven partition; and (b) they express strong antipathy towards Pakistan, holding mainly Jinnah responsible for the partition. Therefore, if the idea was not to employ national education for the perpetuation of partition-related conflicts, this seemed to have not fully worked. It is interesting to note that Pakistani and Bangladeshi national curriculum textbooks, which are taught in a similar overseas context, are overtly anti-India and anti-Pakistan, respectively (Qazi and Shah, 2019a; b).

### **Gender**

the textbooks present gender discrimination in India as an important national identity construct for students to engage with, to understand those social dynamics which encourage it. To further this aspect, they discuss the contribution of international feminist movements and the constitutional measures that India has taken to improve women's situation. Thus, the textbooks present a model to the students which can help them grow out of parochial/patriarchal modes of thinking about the female. The female teachers also supplemented these discourses by creating classroom skits/activities, whereas their male counterparts were shown to be reticent in this regard. Their attitudes suggested their silent disagreement with the education system actors' approach to the current representation of the female gender in the textbooks. The study of the students' data, however, sends enormously confusing signals reflecting strong gendered divisions in Indian society. For example, though an over-whelming majority of girls did refuse to view themselves from the patriarchal vantage point, they still defined themselves through the notion of 'appropriate' female clothing.

Similarly, despite the textbooks' attempt to foster secularism, they appeared to be religious. The notion of appropriate clothing for a model Indian female also became a matter of significant concern for the male students. Similarly, their participatory data suggested how important they deemed it for the Indian female to respect family traditions. Eley and Sunny (1996) maintain that in traditional societies women are taken as 'prized and revered objects of protection rather than agents in their own right' (p. 26). The boy students' reservation over gendered social roles for women and their overarching concerns for their 'character', 'dress' and the notion of 'loyalty' similarly suggest what is argued in Eley and Sunny above. In a similar vein, the female gender also appeared to be a marker of an internal boundary amongst the students, where they viewed Indian women and men as two distinct social categories. This viewing, in a way, is also an example of resistance to the textbook projected enlightened/progressive ideas about the female, which advocates equitable representation of women.

Notwithstanding the aforesaid analysis, the research setting of this study also needs to be taken into consideration when problematising the students' gendered outlook. The KSA is an ultra-conservative society. Since its inception in the 1920s, the country has been under a strict Wahabi version of Islamic Sharia (Lacey, 2009). Therefore, it has been officially binding on all Saudi females to wear Abaya and cover their face when outside the home, *inter alia*. Non-Saudi women have also been required to wear Abaya. These rules remained in force until 2017, and were changed only recently (Chulov, 2017; Arab News, 2018). The students' strong identification with religion, rather than the textbook-based secular ideologies, suggests the influence of the Saudi social structure, where the use of religious terminology and practices is the most salient feature of daily life (Lacey, 2009). Equally, Saudi females routinely wear 'Sharia-compliant' Abaya and face coverings. On the social ladder, they generally stand much higher than the females of expatriate families. Therefore, it can hardly be surprising if the girls of the Indian community nurture a secret desire to emulate them in some measure. Similarly, given the robust social embeddedness of religious ideologies prevalent in the KSA, as Lacey (2009) suggests, the possibility of their surreptitious influence on the mindset of students is rather predictable.

### **Religion**

Despite the textbook-based projection of a secular national image of India, and religious nationalism as a main source of communalism, religion turned out to be a robust marker of the teachers' and students' identity. The teachers seemed to have little acceptance for the textbook discourses, and this trend was reflected in students' data as well. However, the researchers found no evidence that the teachers encouraged the students, either through discourse or social practices, to develop religious tendencies. Hence, we feel inclined to view students' support/identification with religious identity on similar grounds to their gendered approach towards the female, as Indian students' national identity construction through CBSE textbooks in overseas schools contextualised in the context of the ultra-conservative Muslim society of the KSA. Another explanation which can be offered in this respect is that the majority of the sampled population for this study was comprised of Muslim students.

## Conclusion

The thematic analysis of the sampled textbook discourses identified democracy vs. dictatorship, anti-colonial movement and emergence of Indian nationalism, gender and religion as the main themes employed for Indian students' national identity constructions in CBSE schools. The teachers of the sampled school were shown mostly to substantiate the textbook positions and not allow critical discussions in class. This also resulted in hierarchical ideologies being transmitted from the teachers and passively received by the students. However, the teachers were also shown being disillusioned with the practices of democracy in India and identifying with religious identities. Similarly, the students appeared to be identifying with the textbook-pro- moted ideologies yet evincing confused identities (e.g. about India's secular democracy).

Concerning Pakistan, the students took positions which were not projected by the textbooks or the teachers. Two findings are of particular significance in this regard: (i) a large number of the students exhibited antagonism against Pakistan and its founding father; and (ii) they identified with the religious identities and the ideas that foster gender stereotyping. This is despite the fact that, unlike Pakistani national curriculum textbooks, India's NCERT CBSE curriculum textbooks do not engage in fostering anti-Pakistan sentiments (Qazi and Shah, 2019a). Concerning the first point, the students' antipathy seems to be entrenched in the politics of the colonial era resulting in the partition of India in 1947, and the subsequent chequered history of both countries. With the view that the textbooks do not perpetuate anti-Pakistan feelings, an empirical investigation is required to determine what alternate sources foster this.

The anti-Pakistan sentiments of the students have far-reaching socio-economic implications in the context of the KSA, where both communities have been living together for decades as immigrants, mainly for economic reasons. Further research can illuminate the level of social (dis)integration and antipathy/support between both communities, and how these can impact the job market. Similarly, the students' religious tendencies and their ultra-conservative stance on the female gender can have implications for the national cohesion of Indian society on the return of these students/families to their home country. Given the emerging global economic conditions, this can become a regular feature in the days to come. This would similarly have implications for the SDGs.

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