

## Complicating Global South Femininities: Women's School-Girl Narratives and the Text-ility of School-Uniforms

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“Yea, there were girls who used to wear the skirts whenever they wanted to. And when this became recurrent then the teachers used to make comments...”, said Anita<sup>1</sup>, in response to my inquiries about sartorial disciplining during her time as a high-schooler at the Delhi Convent School (DCS). DCS is an English-medium all-girls' convent school in New Delhi, India. After graduating from DCS in 2015, Anita went on to pursue a Bachelors' degree in English. She was enrolled in a graduate program at a public university in Delhi when I approached her in 2019 while working on my M.Phil. thesis<sup>2</sup>.

During our interaction, Anita alluded to the three sets of school-uniforms she had to wear as a school-girl—the skirt-blouse for days with a scheduled PTE (Physical Training Education) period, the tracksuit for the cold winter months, and the all-season *Salwar-Kameez*<sup>3</sup> for ordinary days. Multiple instances of dress rules violation were narrated by her, whereby girl students were found to be wearing the wrong uniform-set not befitting a particular day/season/occasion and the manner in which violators were reprimanded. This ritualistic morning uniform inspection that occurred at

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<sup>1</sup> Names of all interviewees have been changed to protect their identities. All interview participants were women over the age of 18 and as alumnae of Delhi Convent School (DCS) spoke of their girlhoods in retrospect. DCS is a pseudonym used to refer to the minority-Christian educational institution in New Delhi. Anita, Sana, Sadhna, and Kamna hail from different religious backgrounds (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh respectively). All four interviewees are highly educated with postgraduate degrees and as middle/upper class women—who grew up in the metropolitan city of Delhi—had experience with paid-formal employment. Their association with DCS roughly coincides with the timeline of the 1960s-2010s; in this time Sadhna and Kamna had also served as teachers at their alma mater. The interviewees spoke in English with intermittent use of Hindi. I established contact with them through common acquaintances who, along with me, had also received convent-school education. My occupational/class position as a postgraduate researcher from an affluent background with a good grasp of the English language took precedence over my non-dominant socio-cultural positionality as a non-Savarna Bihari-Catholic woman. The privilege of possessing the same kind of cultural capital that I critique in the essay allowed me to claim stake in my field of interest and present myself as a subversive insider. Having spent a long amount of time in Delhi had also allowed me to establish a good rapport with the participants.

<sup>2</sup> This essay draws from the final chapter of my M.Phil. thesis titled, *Girlhood and School Discipline: Case Study of a Delhi Convent School*. Based on women's coming-of-age narratives (8 semi-structured interviews with DCS alumnae who graduated between 1970-2015), the chapter demonstrated how the sartorial (school uniform), the temporal (morning-assembly) and cultural (girl culture/peer relationships) dimensions of school-life at DCS served as modes of disciplining. It broadly discussed the implications of women's retrospective narrations of their memories of girlhood and how their resistance to/conformity with gendered norms should be read in complex terms.

<sup>3</sup> *Salwar-Kameez*, equivalent to 'trousers-shirt', is a modest garment worn by girls and women in the northern part of the South Asian peninsula. The long top, which usually covers the upper-half of the trousers, can be made to fit loosely and is comfortable to wear. Conventionally, the *Salwar-Kameez* is a trio and comes with a scarf (*dupatta/odhani/chunni*). It is often donned as ethnic-formals in public/corporate work-spaces with or without the scarf.

DCS is not a stand-alone occurrence but a daily routine at most schools in India. Bhandari (2014), Dore (2014), Gogoi (2014) and Bala Kannan (2022), in their respective school-ethnographies, have highlighted the place of the school-uniform in the school's disciplinary regime. According to them, the school-uniform encodes norms of respectability and authority, uniformity and institutional prestige, as well as hygiene and social order. The early morning uniform-inspection and embodied scrutinization at DCS resulted in punishments—ranging from teachers' passive-aggressive taunting to a note for the parents on the last page of the school-diary/"almanac" and the levying of a not so hefty but punitive monetary fine—for minor incursions. In another instance, Sana narrated, in detail, the intimate workings of the disciplinary regime of the morning assembly:

...we used to like...form queues and go out and then they would just single out and bring one person out...everybody would be in a queue and would be climbing up the stairs and everybody who would pass... they would be monitoring you from top to bottom and you would be scanned for it, and then pulled out...

Both Anita and Sana graduated from DCS in the early 2010s and attended this institution for a considerable part of their childhoods; apart from their families, DCS was the primary site for enculturation into gendered roles/subjectivities. Their recollections stood in stark contrast to Sadhna's narration and observations. Sadhna had attended DCS in the 1970s and was also employed as a teacher at DCS in the 1990s. According to her, the rigidity around the school uniform was a recent development. During her time (as a girl student), she insisted that they would only wear skirts. She vividly remembered the early 1990s, when the *Salwar-Kameez* replaced the skirts. According to Sadhna, the *Salwar-Kameez* was introduced "to protect the modesty of the child" and was an attempt by DCS, a minority-Christian institution, at "being more Indian," but more so, it was done for practical reasons of feasibility, because skirts were inadequate for the colder months. Kamna, who graduated from DCS around the same time as Sadhna, said that their skirts were "very smart" and that they "were all very proud of their uniform." Similar to Sadhna, Kamna had been a teacher of English and Social Studies at DCS at the time the *Salwar-Kameez* was introduced. She distinctly recalled the reaction of girl students in her classes to this change to the school uniform:

...You know, the girls like they sit anyhow when they're wearing a skirt and then your legs show and they're not mindful of how this...I think... so it's like the girls initially reacted—"we don't want to wear Salwar-Kameez and what is this *behenji*<sup>4</sup> and you know...we look like government school people you know, but

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<sup>4</sup> Behenji, is a Hindi-slang used to pejoratively profile unmarried-young girls and women who are typecast as rustic, conservative and uptight. Girls with working-class backgrounds and marginalized caste-identities find themselves to be the frequent target of this stereotyping.

then they realized later that you can sit anywhere, you can climb stairs without people [looking up your skirt]...

Changes introduced to the school uniform in the early 1990s are an indicator of the shifting contingencies which shaped the evolution of DCS' social charter<sup>5</sup> (Ray 1988). DCS, an institution built in the early 20th century by the Christian missionaries, served as a haven for daughters and grand-daughters of the English-speaking native elites—freedom fighters and the ruling elite, bureaucrats, businessmen, and middle-class professionals in post-independent India. In post-colonial India, DCS played an instrumental role in the political socialization of school-girls through a hidden curriculum comprising the disciplining of the body and a hetero-patriarchal civic education. The 1990s were marked by the embracing of neoliberal values symbolized in the adoption of the New Economic Policy in 1991 which put India on the track of structural readjustments. This rapid and drastic economic reorientation was accompanied by the simultaneous rise of right-wing Hindutva politics of cultural revivalism and social preservation. Thus, neoliberal restructuring of the economy fueled the fears of Brahmanical patriarchy<sup>6</sup> and set in motion a moral panic about cultural traditions and the social fabric of India (Wilson, Loh, and Purewal 2018). Building upon Spivak's (1999, 337) musings on "text-ility"<sup>7</sup>, the school uniform is suspended in a social context such that it carries the inscription of shifting politico-historical discourses and sticks to the body of its wearer. The text-ility of school uniforms pertains to cultural politics as well as the symbolic shifts in public morality and can therefore provide insights into the discursive production of femininities.

Ray (1988), in her school-ethnography of St. Mary's Convent School (SMC) located in Calcutta, recognized the presence of "habitus"<sup>8</sup>—a theory of cultural capital by Bourdieu (1977), which has interpretive valency in the case of DCS. The school-girls at both SMC and DCS are postcolonial

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<sup>5</sup> Ray's (1988) conception of the social charter pertains to the 'official script' of the school administration/authorities/establishment and the values that the institution thrives to inculcate among its student body. The social charter can be situated by means of assessing the schools' mission statement/goals and motto/codes of conduct/rules and regulations/statement of academic excellence etc.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading, refer to Omvedt (2000).

<sup>7</sup> In her chapter on culture in the 1999 classic *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Spivak writes at length about cultural history and cultural production which has come to captivate poststructural/postmodern imagination. She hints at the possibility of a correlation between modes of production and their accompanying cultural explanations. Her mention of the term 'text-ility' is immensely brief. However, despite its phonetic proximity to text/textual, text-ility in effect is a weaving/textile metaphor. Therefore, instead of presenting the social as a text it carries the potential of imagining the social fabric. She identifies clothing as an arena of inscription which is woven into the social text (Spivak 1999, 337).

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu (1977) envisages the habitus as composed of covert symbolic representations and ritual practices that maintain and reproduce the clout of a group as a whole while simultaneously allowing individual members to draw upon its collective prestige. The habitus maintains its position of dominance through the accumulation of cultural and social capital. In simple terms, some of the ways in which cultural capital manifests itself are—intergenerational wealth of materials/access to language skills/learning of bodily comportment and table manners/niche taste in books etc. Similarly, access to close-knit circles of affluent/influential people, networking and establishing contacts with community leaders etc. are forms of social capital. The theoretical vibrancy of a concept like habitus lies in its ability to theorize the privileged possession of cultural/ social capital in terms that transcend ascriptions of class identity.

citizen-subjects who, through an enrollment in their respective schools and continued association with their alma mater, can maintain or lay claims to a high social status. Therefore, even when the interviewees resisted the school's surveillance of dressed bodies, they would conform to school rules and actively appropriate the cultural and symbolic capital they came to acquire as members of the DCS student body. For instance, in Kamna's account, girl students actively disassociated from working-class/public school girlhood experiences captured by the text-ility of the *Salwar-Kameez*. This conflicting tendency of their simultaneous acceptance and criticism of DCS' dress rules appear counterintuitive and reiterate the need for decentering and complicating southern femininities. Therefore, while DCS may be a site for the social reproduction of the normative post-colonial girl femininity, the dominant discourse on girlhood is far from a hegemonizing total.

The text-ility of sartorial reforms at DCS challenge two fundamental conceptions of the girl-child that has come to capture the trans-national imagination of girlhood in the global south: 1) *Girls-as-victims*: the racialized-victimized, educationally disempowered Third-World girl at the core of the 'white savior complex' discussed in Walters (2017), 2) *Girls-as-agential*: the romance of girl resistances through the valorization of marginal girlhoods, like those of Malala Yousafzai, Ahad Tamim, and Autumn Peltier. This double-edged formulation of the girl-child situated in the global south may seem paradoxical at first. However, a closer look reveals that they coexist and are co-constitutive. This phenomenon points toward the epistemological imperative to decenter and complicate southern feminisms and femininities—both in their relation to the global north as well as in the context of south-south relations. According to Desai (2020), universalistic ideations of the global north and south misleadingly compartmentalize and "divide power and privilege in the North from precarity and powerlessness in the South" (382). Whereas, for Asher & Ramamurthy (2020) the regionally over-determined binaries of postcolonial (as South Asian) and decolonial (as Latin American) feminist scholarships snub the potential for building solidarities while overestimating the presence of vicissitudes within the global south. In both Desai (2020) and Asher & Ramamurthy (2020), what constitutes the epistemic positioning of the global north and the global south presents itself as the bone of contention.

To summarize, this essay, through the medium of women's coming-of-age testimonies, began with an assumption that the routine inspection of school uniforms at DCS is a characteristic feature of the school's disciplinary regime and an element of a gendered hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum shapes girl-subjectivities and socializes them into performing normative/dominant femininity. By drawing upon theoretical concepts like Ray's (1988) "social charter" and Spivak's (1999) "text-ility," the essay explains a) why there was a shift in DCS's dress code in the 1990s and b) how changes in the school uniform correlate to the shifting terrain of socio-political discourse and morality in the era of Hindutva neoliberalism. The simultaneous resistance to and embracing of the dress code by DCS alumnae reflects a complex "habitus" that the interviewees were members of (Bourdieu 1977). Their capacity to lay claims to cultural capital coincides with a simultaneous sartorial regulation of their bodies. This poses a challenge to the neat dyadic theorization of girls as either agential or victims. Therefore, the essay concludes by arguing in

favor of complicating global south femininities for a more robust, intersectional, and inclusive reading of hegemonic and marginal girl subjectivities across historical/geographical contexts.

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### Author Biography

Aakanksha D’Cruz (she/her) is a II-Year Ph.D. scholar in the Department of Global & International Studies at the University of California, Irvine. Her doctoral dissertation will be a study of developmental discourses around education for girls in the Global South. Her most recent publication titled, “Knees and Feet Together, Shoulders Back and Chest Out”: Embodying the Hidden Curriculum through Women’s Girlhood Narratives” highlights the gendered dynamics of the discursive space of the school which operate through measures of supervision, inspection and reprimand. Her broader research interests fall within the purview of studies of postcolonial India, critical theory, development studies, and girl studies.

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