


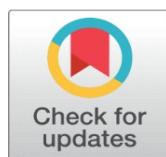
# FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY: CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN ODISHA'S SHISHU VIDYA MANDIRS

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## DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v6.i2.2025.5786

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs) in Odisha contribute to cultural identity formation among school children. Based entirely on secondary sources, it draws from existing research on indigenous education, cultural pedagogy, and nationalist schooling to explore how these institutions embed Bharatiya values through curriculum, rituals, and symbolic practices. SVMs aim to foster moral development and national pride by integrating Vedic traditions, Sanskritised teachings, and community-based festivals into everyday school life. Positioned as culturally rooted alternatives to mainstream education, they seek to strengthen local identities while aligning students with a broader Hindu-nationalist vision. However, this emphasis on a singular cultural narrative raises important questions about inclusivity and the representation of diverse communities, especially tribal and minority groups. The article calls for a more pluralistic approach to culturally responsive education that respects India's rich diversity while maintaining the strengths of traditional value-based learning

**Keywords:** Shishu Vidya Mandir, Cultural Identity, Odisha, Indigenous Education, Nationalism, Curriculum, Symbolic Education



## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly globalizing world, the landscape of education is increasingly shaped by uniform curricula, technological standardization, and cultural homogenization. While these trends offer benefits such as international mobility and access to global knowledge, they also pose significant risks—most notably, the marginalization of local cultures, indigenous knowledge systems, and native languages. Education, once a deeply rooted social and cultural experience, is now often detached from the lived realities of local communities. As Apple (2004) notes, global educational homogenization is not merely about curricular alignment but represents a deeper structural challenge to cultural diversity and identity preservation. In many parts of the world, especially in postcolonial societies, education is now at a crossroads caught between global trends and the imperative to safeguard cultural heritage.

India's education system presents a compelling case in this context. With its long history of colonial rule, India inherited an educational structure that was designed to serve administrative efficiency rather than nurture cultural roots or foster indigenous knowledge. The British educational policies emphasized English language instruction, secularism in

moral education, and a focus on abstract, Western scientific knowledge. As Kumar (1991) argues, this colonial legacy created a fundamental disconnect between school learning and the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts of Indian children. Despite post-independence efforts to reform and localize the curriculum, the dominance of Western models and languages in Indian education remains persistent.



Celebration of Different Festivals across different SVMs of Odisha

**Figure1** A vibrant visual tapestry of Shishu Vidya Mandirs, where discipline, culture, and nationalism converge through architecture, assembly, and everyday ritual.

It is against this backdrop that Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs), established by Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan, emerge as culturally rooted alternatives to mainstream education. Founded on the principles of Bharatiyata, Indianness, or Indian cultural essence, SVMs aim to offer more than academic instruction. They aspire to shape morally grounded, culturally aware, and nationally committed individuals by intertwining academic subjects with Indian traditions, rituals, and values. As Pathak (2017) explains, these schools embed Vedic knowledge, Sanskrit prayers, and culturally significant narratives into daily school life, reasserting the role of education as a vehicle for cultural transmission.

In Odisha, a state known for its rich tribal heritage and spiritual traditions, the growth of SVMs has been particularly notable. These schools have found resonance among tribal and rural communities, where formal government or missionary schools have often failed to align with local worldviews. According to Dash (2021) and Sharma (2022), SVMs in Odisha have adapted their curricula and practices to include elements of local culture, be it through celebrating regional festivals like Nuakhai, incorporating Odia as the medium of instruction, or involving students in community rituals that honor ancestors and nature. These practices not only affirm the students' identity but also strengthen their emotional connection to their roots.

More importantly, SVMs humanize education. In a world increasingly driven by competition, grades, and rote learning, these schools reintroduce the idea of the school as a community. Teachers are not just instructors; they are Acharyas and mentors. Learning is not confined to textbooks but unfolds through storytelling, singing, prayer, and participation in school assemblies that blend nationalism with spirituality. Students begin their day with collective chants, not as a ritual of habit but as a moment of shared consciousness. This holistic approach nurtures a sense of belonging, dignity, and discipline, qualities that modern education often overlooks in its pursuit of outcomes and performance metrics.

Yet, while SVMs succeed in reviving and reinforcing cultural values, they also raise important questions. Their strong alignment with Hindu traditions and Sanskritised narratives invites scrutiny regarding the inclusivity of tribal, Dalit, and minority cultures within the educational framework. There is an inherent tension between promoting a unified cultural identity and preserving the plurality that defines India. If not carefully navigated, the goal of cultural affirmation may risk turning into cultural homogenization.

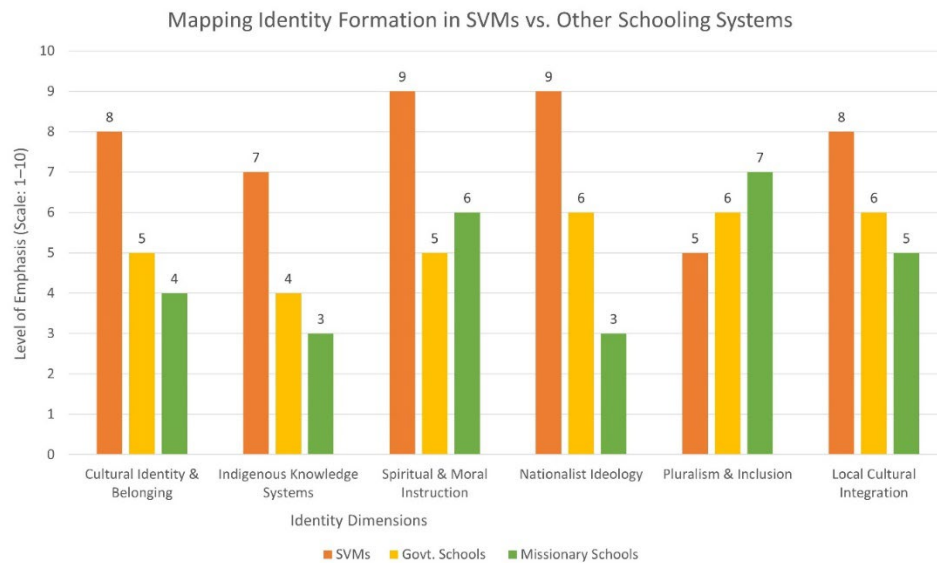
Nonetheless, the SVM model offers valuable insights into how education can be rooted, humane, and transformative. By engaging students with their community, history, and moral universe, SVMs attempt to restore the original spirit of education as a journey not just of the mind, but of the heart and soul. In this sense, they reflect a broader aspiration: to

make education not merely a means to employment, but a path toward cultural continuity, ethical living, and meaningful citizenship in a diverse and vibrant nation.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The reviewed literature highlights the complex role of educational institutions in shaping cultural identity through diverse pedagogical, ideological, and cultural practices. Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs), rooted in indigenous and nationalist educational visions, prioritize cultural rituals, spiritual instruction, and moral development. Government schools, on the other hand, reflect a more bureaucratic and secular approach, while missionary schools emphasize pluralism and global perspectives, often downplaying indigenous or nationalist content.

The following chart synthesizes these thematic insights by mapping the level of emphasis placed on six core identity dimensions across the three school types. It visually captures how SVMs align more closely with cultural assertion and spiritual-nationalist pedagogy, while other systems occupy distinct yet intersecting positions on the identity spectrum.



**Figure 1** Comparative Emphasis on Identity Formation Dimensions Across Schooling Systems

### 2.1. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND EDUCATION

Cultural identity is a complex, evolving concept that goes beyond ethnicity or heritage. It encompasses how individuals and communities see themselves through shared languages, rituals, religious practices, memories, and ways of living (Hall, 1996). This identity is not inherited passively—it is actively constructed and redefined throughout one's life, especially during childhood. In this process, schools play a central role. They are not just places where academic knowledge is transmitted, but also where values, norms, and a sense of belonging are shaped. As Banks (2006) highlights, educational environments help determine which cultural narratives are emphasized, which languages are spoken, and whose histories are validated or ignored. This makes education a powerful site for identity formation.

However, in postcolonial societies like India, schools can also become spaces of tension. As Bhabha (1994) argues, they may simultaneously empower students by offering upward mobility while also imposing dominant ideologies that silence alternative worldviews. This dual character makes the role of schools in shaping cultural identity both influential and contested. For children from marginalized or tribal communities, whether the school affirms their identity or asks them to assimilate into a different cultural framework can have a lasting impact on their self-perception and future participation in society.

### 2.2. INDIGENOUS EDUCATION MODELS

Indigenous education is built on the belief that knowledge is not only found in textbooks or formal institutions, but is deeply embedded in the culture, environment, and daily life of communities. Unlike Western models that often

prioritize testing, individual achievement, and standardized curricula, indigenous frameworks emphasize collective wisdom, spiritual connection, and continuity across generations (Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2002). These systems value the oral transmission of stories, respect for elders, and a sense of responsibility to the community and nature.

Indian thinkers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo envisioned similar ideals for Indian education. Tagore (1917) proposed an educational model that was in harmony with nature, art, and intuitive learning, far removed from colonial regimentation. Aurobindo focused on the spiritual and moral upliftment of the learner, advocating education that cultivated the soul along with the intellect.

Shishu Vidya Mandirs resonate with these philosophies. They incorporate daily rituals such as prayer assemblies, storytelling sessions based on Indian epics, and the use of regional languages in teaching (Joshi, 2016; Pathak, 2017). Their emphasis is on nurturing not just literacy or numeracy but also values such as humility, discipline, and cultural pride. In this way, they function as modern embodiments of indigenous and culturally embedded education that prioritize the holistic development of the child within their socio-cultural context.

## 2.3. NATIONALISM AND PEDAGOGY

Education is never ideologically neutral. The broader political and cultural goals of a society often influence it. In India, the idea of linking education with national identity has deep historical roots. After independence, there was a strong push to build a sense of unity and pride among a diverse population. Institutions like Shishu Vidya Mandirs emerged in this context, with the explicit goal of promoting Bharatiyata, a notion of Indian-ness based on shared heritage, moral values, and spiritual roots (Mukherjee, 2011).

SVMs follow a form of cultural pedagogy that integrates mythological stories, the worship of national heroes, and the daily recitation of Sanskrit shlokas to instill patriotism and moral character. These elements are meant to foster a collective identity rooted in Hindu traditions and ancient Indian wisdom (Nanda, 2009). Students are encouraged to see themselves not just as learners but as future citizens entrusted with upholding civilizational values.

However, this approach has sparked critical debate. While it can create a strong sense of discipline, purpose, and pride, it may also present a narrow vision of Indian identity, one that is largely Hindu and Sanskritic in orientation. Wagh (2020) and others caution that this can marginalize non-Hindu, Dalit, tribal, and minority communities whose cultural experiences differ from the dominant narrative. If education is to be truly inclusive, it must celebrate the full spectrum of India's plural heritage rather than promoting a singular civilizational ideal.

## 2.4. THE ODISHA CONTEXT

Odisha stands out as a culturally rich and diverse state, home to a wide array of tribal groups, folk traditions, and deeply spiritual practices. These communities possess unique languages, customs, festivals, and social norms that often do not find space in the mainstream Indian educational system. This makes the role of culturally responsive schools even more vital in this region. Shishu Vidya Mandirs in Odisha attempt to address this by integrating local traditions into their pedagogy. In districts like Rayagada, Kandhamal, and Mayurbhanj, SVMs celebrate regional festivals such as Nuakhai and Raja Parba within the school setting, blending them with broader Indian values and rituals (Mishra, 2018).

The use of Odia as a medium of instruction, the inclusion of tribal folklore in storytelling sessions, and participation in community events help these schools connect more deeply with students' lived realities (Tripathy, 2021). This culturally adaptive approach helps foster a sense of belonging and validation for tribal students, many of whom are first-generation learners.

However, there is a fine line between cultural inclusion and cultural absorption. While SVMs include tribal practices, they often reinterpret them within a larger Sanskritic or Hindu-nationalist framework. As a result, the tribal identity may be presented only in symbolic forms through dance performances or folk songs, while the deeper cosmologies and belief systems of these communities may remain underrepresented. This raises important questions about whether such educational models are truly pluralistic or subtly assimilationist. Balancing respect for local identities with national integration remains a key challenge for schools in Odisha and across India.



### 3. METHODOLOGY: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH

This study employs a critical literature review methodology to investigate the role of Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs) in shaping cultural identity among school children in Odisha. Rather than relying on primary data such as fieldwork or interviews, this approach systematically engages with existing scholarly works, policy documents, institutional publications, and curriculum materials to interpret how cultural, educational, and ideological elements intersect in the pedagogical practices of SVMs. The method allows for a nuanced understanding of both the intent and implications of such institutions within broader educational and socio-political frameworks.

The methodological framework draws heavily on Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy (1970), which advocates for an education that fosters critical thinking, self-awareness, and the capacity to challenge structures of oppression. Freire's work reminds us that schools are not neutral spaces—they either reproduce existing power hierarchies or act as instruments for liberation. In the case of SVMs, this framework helps examine whether their value-based education and cultural curriculum encourage critical engagement or function more as a form of moral conditioning rooted in a singular worldview.

Another foundational lens comes from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction (1986), which analyzes how education systems perpetuate dominant cultural values by legitimizing specific forms of knowledge, behavior, and language. Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power are particularly useful in understanding how SVMs, through their Sanskritized curricula and moral instruction, provide students with a form of culturally recognized competence. This lens allows for a critical assessment of whether SVMs offer empowerment to marginalized students or assimilate them into a dominant cultural order, potentially at the cost of their native identities.

Lastly, the study is grounded in indigenous knowledge frameworks as articulated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Marie Battiste (2002). These scholars argue for a decolonization of educational research and practice, advocating the inclusion of indigenous worldviews, epistemologies, and community practices in mainstream education. Their perspectives enable a critical reading of how SVMs engage with tribal and local cultural traditions in Odisha. Do these schools truly validate indigenous knowledge, or do they merely incorporate superficial cultural elements while privileging a Sanskritic or pan-Hindu worldview? By synthesizing these critical perspectives, the literature review not only maps the ideological contours of SVMs but also evaluates their pedagogical inclusivity and cultural sensitivity.

<i>Theoretical Lens</i>	<i>Key Scholar(s)</i>	<i>Core Concepts</i>	<i>Application to Study</i>
<i>Critical Pedagogy</i>	<i>Paulo Freire (1970)</i>	<i>Education as a tool for consciousness, social justice, and liberation</i>	<i>Evaluates whether SVMs promote critical thinking or reinforce moral conformity</i>
<i>Cultural Reproduction Theory</i>	<i>Pierre Bourdieu (1986)</i>	<i>Cultural capital, symbolic power, and reproduction of dominant ideologies</i>	<i>Analyzes how SVMs transmit values aligned with dominant (Sanskritic) cultural norms</i>
<i>Indigenous Knowledge Systems</i>	<i>Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Marie Battiste (2002)</i>	<i>Decolonizing education, validating local epistemologies, and intergenerational learning</i>	<i>Assesses how SVMs engage with or appropriate tribal and regional traditions in Odisha</i>

**Table 1** Methodological Framework for Critical Literature Review

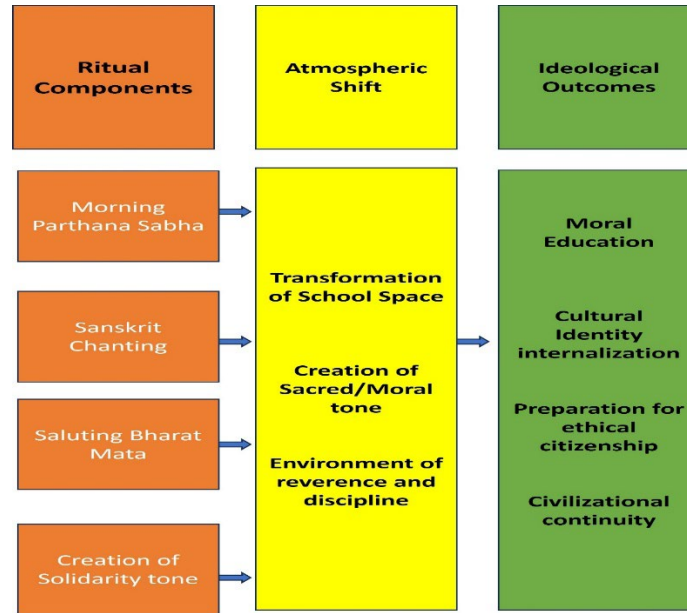
## 4. FINDINGS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

### 4.1. RITUALISATION OF EDUCATION

One of the defining features of Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs) is the ritualisation of the school space, which transforms it from a secular institution into a semi-sacred domain. Unlike conventional schools, where academic instruction begins with a bell, SVMs begin their day with a Prarthana Sabha a collective prayer assembly involving the chanting of Sanskrit mantras, salutation to Bharat Mata, and often the singing of patriotic songs (Pathak, 2017). These rituals are not peripheral events but central pedagogical tools that create a spiritual and moral atmosphere for learning. The physical

environment of the school often mirrors this sacred ethos, with portraits of Indian sages, gods, and national heroes adorning classrooms and halls.

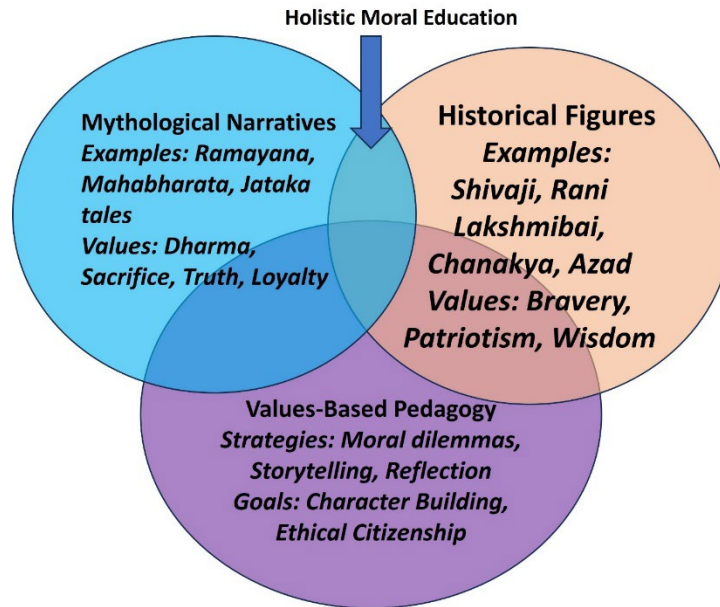
This sacralisation instils a sense of discipline and reverence in students. Education is framed not merely as a right or necessity but as a sacred duty tied to national and cultural responsibilities. The morning rituals symbolically reinforce values such as unity, devotion, and moral conduct. In doing so, they prepare students not only for academic instruction but also for ethical citizenship. Through repeated ritual practices, students are subtly inducted into a cultural worldview where learning is considered a path to both personal development and civilizational continuity.



**Figure 2** Daily Rituals as Pedagogical Tools in Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs)

## 4.2. MORAL PEDAGOGY THROUGH EPICS

Shishu Vidya Mandirs integrate moral education deeply into their curriculum by drawing upon traditional Indian epics and historical figures as pedagogical tools. Stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Jataka tales, and Puranic literature are presented not simply as mythology or folklore but as moral case studies meant to teach children values such as truth, loyalty, courage, and sacrifice (Sharma, 2022; Rao, 2017). Characters like Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Bhishma, and Krishna are frequently invoked as ethical models for students to emulate in their own lives.



**Figure 3** Integration of Mythological Narratives, Historical Figures, and Values-Based Pedagogy in SVMs

In addition to mythological narratives, historical figures such as Chanakya, Shivaji, Rani Lakshmibai, and Chandrashekhar Azad are included in the curriculum to demonstrate real-life applications of bravery, patriotism, and strategic wisdom. Teachers often use these stories in interactive ways, asking students to reflect on moral dilemmas or draw connections between the past and present. This mode of teaching aligns with a values-based pedagogy that moves beyond academic instruction to character building.

Such storytelling-based pedagogy ensures that moral values are internalized through cultural and historical frames that are familiar and revered. While the approach fosters ethical sensitivity and civic consciousness, it also subtly constructs a nationalistic moral order that aligns closely with traditional Hindu ideals.

### 4.3. LANGUAGE AND VERNACULAR IDENTITY

Language occupies a central place in the identity politics of education, and SVMs explicitly position themselves against the dominance of English-medium instruction. In their classrooms, regional languages, primarily Odia in the case of Odisha, and Sanskrit are emphasized as the primary vehicles for communication, instruction, and ritual practice (Rao, 2017). This choice is both ideological and pedagogical. It is grounded in the belief that one's cultural worldview is best expressed and preserved through native languages. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that language is a repository of culture and memory; when a student is educated in a foreign language, they are often taught to think and dream in someone else's narrative.

By prioritizing Sanskrit and Odia over English, SVMs aim to decolonize students' linguistic consciousness and foster a civilizational connection to India's past. Terms like *gyan pustika* (book of knowledge) and *acharya* (teacher) are used regularly, reinforcing cultural belonging through vocabulary. This linguistic environment also helps bridge the gap between home and school, particularly for rural and tribal students who may speak Odia or a regional dialect at home. However, the emphasis on Sanskrit also reflects a push toward cultural homogenization under a Hindu-nationalist framework, which may overlook the linguistic diversity of India's tribal and minority groups.

Theme	SVM Language Practice	Purpose / Rationale	Cultural/Ideological Implication
<b>Medium of Instruction</b>	Emphasis on Odia and Sanskrit	Promote cultural rootedness; resist English hegemony	Decolonization of knowledge; civilizational pride
<b>Vocabulary &amp; Terminology</b>	Use of traditional terms like <i>gyan pustika</i> , <i>acharya</i> , <i>shiksha</i>	Embed cultural meaning into daily language	Reinforces a sacred, traditional view of education

<b>Link to Home Culture</b>	Odia dialects spoken by rural/tribal students accepted in classroom	Reduce linguistic alienation; ease learning for first-generation learners	Builds continuity between home and school; promotes belonging
<b>Resistance to English</b>	English marginalized in curriculum	Challenge colonial linguistic dominance	Encourages linguistic nationalism; fosters native pride
<b>Promotion of Sanskrit</b>	Daily chants, prayers, and rituals conducted in Sanskrit	Align with ancient Indian traditions and spiritual pedagogy	Reflects Hindu-nationalist ethos; potential marginalization of non-Sanskritic cultures
<b>Linguistic Inclusivity Issues</b>	Limited use of tribal and minority languages	Sanskrit and Odia prioritized over other local tongues	Risks linguistic homogenization; may suppress regional/tribal linguistic diversity

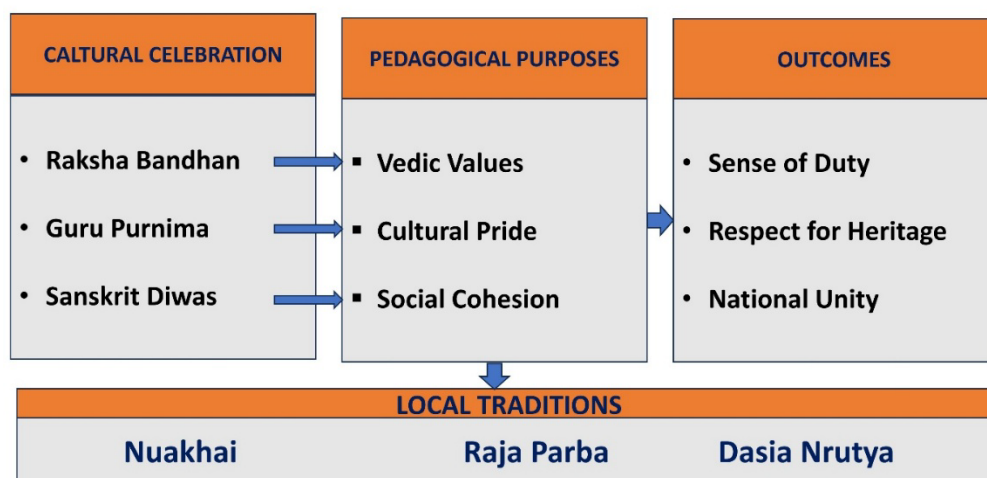
**Table 2** Language Use in SVMs and Its Role in Cultural Identity Formation

#### 4.4. FESTIVAL AND CIVIC PEDAGOGY

One of the most engaging aspects of SVM pedagogy is the incorporation of festivals and civic rituals into the educational experience. Rather than treating festivals as holidays or extracurricular events, SVMs use them as active pedagogical tools to teach civic values, cultural pride, and social cohesion. Celebrations like Raksha Bandhan, Vasant Panchami, Guru Purnima, and Sanskrit Diwas are reinterpreted within the school setting to convey lessons on duty, respect, and national unity (Mishra, 2018). For example, on Raksha Bandhan, students may tie rakhis not just to each other but also to public servants like police officers or sanitation workers, symbolizing gratitude and community solidarity.

In Odisha's tribal regions, schools also celebrate local traditions such as Nuakhai, Raja Parba, and folk dances like Desia Nrutya. These inclusions serve two purposes: they validate the students' cultural backgrounds and integrate local traditions into a broader nationalist framework. Through songs, performances, and cultural exhibitions, students become both performers and preservers of cultural heritage.

##### FESTIVAL AND CIVIC RITUALS IN SHISHU VIDYA MANDIRS



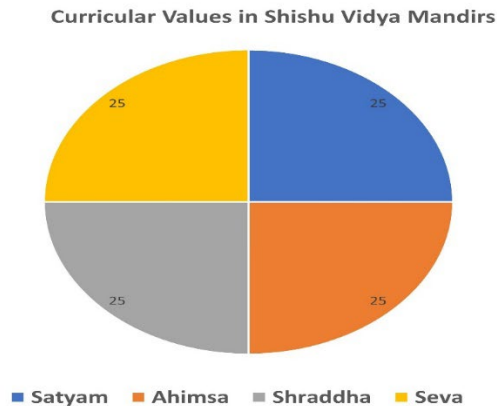
**Figure 4** Festivals and Civic Rituals as Pedagogical Tools in Shishu Vidya Mandirs

This approach fosters a civic imagination rooted in culture. By participating in these rituals, students internalize the idea of service, respect, and national pride in emotionally resonant ways. However, there is also the concern that local traditions are sometimes framed within a Sanskritic hierarchy, risking symbolic rather than substantive inclusion.



## 4.5. CURRICULUM AS CULTURAL ARCHIVE

The curriculum of Vidya Bharati-affiliated Shishu Vidya Mandirs serves as a carefully constructed cultural archive. Unlike the curricula of NCERT or state boards that often strive for secular neutrality, the SVM curriculum is explicitly values-driven and civilizational in its orientation. Subjects are not merely academic; they are structured around core Indian philosophical concepts such as Satyam (truth), Ahimsa (non-violence), Shraddha (faith), and Seva (service) (Vidya Bharati, 2020). These values are woven into every subject area, language, social studies, and even science, to promote ethical reasoning alongside cognitive development.



**Figure 5** Composition of the Ideological Curriculum in Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs)

Textbooks often feature biographies of national heroes, saints, freedom fighters, and sages. Lessons like “Why We Say Bharat and Not India” introduce students to nationalist historiography at an early age (Sharma, 2022). The child is not positioned as a neutral learner but as an inheritor of a glorious civilizational legacy. The pedagogical tone is less about inquiry and more about affirmation, affirming one’s duty to the nation, family, and faith.

While such a curriculum can be empowering by offering children a proud sense of identity and belonging, it may also exclude or marginalize alternative perspectives, especially those of religious and cultural minorities. The challenge lies in balancing cultural affirmation with inclusivity in a pluralistic society.

## 5. DISCUSSION

SVMs operate at the intersection of cultural preservation and ideological formation. On one hand, they offer a space where traditional Indian values, myths, and rituals are transmitted to a new generation, instilling a sense of historical continuity and belonging. Yet, on the other hand, as Gramsci (1971) argues, cultural institutions like schools are not merely neutral vessels of knowledge; they also function as sites of cultural hegemony. Through daily practices such as Vedic chants, mythological storytelling, and the veneration of national icons, SVMs tend to normalize a particular version of Indian identity, one deeply rooted in Hindu civilizational narratives. This vision becomes internalized by students as the cultural default, subtly marginalizing other ways of being Indian.

While Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital shows how students, especially those from tribal or rural backgrounds, can gain social legitimacy and symbolic power through participation in such institutions, the path to this legitimacy often involves assimilation. As Srinivas (1956) explains through the idea of Sanskritisation, marginalized communities may adopt dominant cultural markers not out of preference but out of necessity to gain acceptance and social mobility in a system that favors Brahminical norms. In SVMs, including tribal songs or dances during annual events might seem inclusive, but when they are framed within a Vedic or nationalist context, they risk becoming token gestures. Smith (1999) warns that without epistemic parity, treating indigenous worldviews as equally valid sources of knowledge, such inclusion is more about appearance than substance.

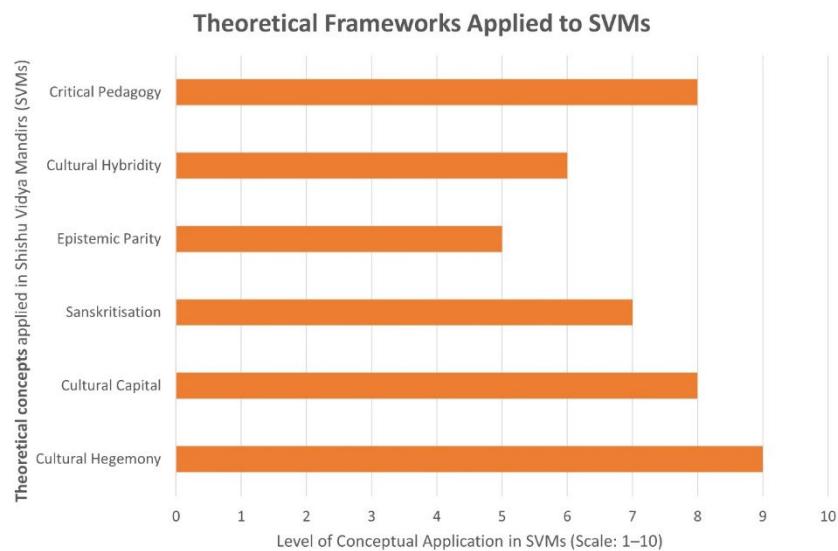
Bhabha’s (1994) notion of hybridity offers a more optimistic lens by highlighting how cultural interactions can give rise to new, dynamic forms of identity. In SVMs, one might witness a blend of Desia folk performance followed by Sanskrit recitation, an example of pedagogical hybridity. But hybridity, as Bhabha emphasizes, must be critically examined: who gets to define this fusion, and which traditions are given more symbolic weight? Often, the regional is folded into the national in a way that maintains the hierarchy rather than dismantling it. This makes it crucial to interrogate whether

these schools are genuinely fostering intercultural dialogue or subtly enforcing cultural conformity under the guise of unity.

<i>Theorist</i>	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Applied Insight in SVMs</i>
<i>Gramsci (1971)</i>	<i>Cultural Hegemony</i>	<i>Normalization of Hindu-nationalist identity through daily rituals</i>
<i>Bourdieu (1986)</i>	<i>Cultural Capital</i>	<i>Tribal students gain symbolic legitimacy via Sanskritic practices</i>
<i>Srinivas (1956)</i>	<i>Sanskritisation</i>	<i>Risk of assimilation into dominant Hindu cultural norms</i>
<i>Smith (1999)</i>	<i>Epistemic Parity</i>	<i>Questionable depth of tribal knowledge inclusion</i>
<i>Bhabha (1994)</i>	<i>Cultural Hybridity</i>	<i>Superficial fusion vs. true intercultural dialogue</i>
<i>Freire (1970)</i>	<i>Critical Pedagogy</i>	<i>Need for reflexive education beyond moral conditioning</i>

**Table 3** Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application in Understanding Cultural Identity Formation in Shishu Vidya Mandirs

Finally, Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy reminds us that education must empower students not only to participate in culture but to question it. While SVMs successfully instill discipline and pride, they must also create space for critical reflection. Are students encouraged to ask why certain stories are told and others omitted? Are they invited to compare diverse cultural values, or are they simply expected to absorb a singular narrative? Without encouraging critical consciousness, even the most culturally rich curriculum risks becoming an instrument of indoctrination rather than transformation.



**Figure 6** Application of Key Theoretical Concepts in Shishu Vidya Mandirs (SVMs)

## 6. CONCLUSION

SVMs in Odisha exemplify how education can function as a tool of cultural reaffirmation. Their integration of rituals, language, and civic duties offers a compelling model of value-based schooling. However, for such education to remain equitable and inclusive, it must go beyond singular nationalist narratives and embrace India's plural traditions (Sen, 2005). The future of culturally rooted pedagogy lies in its ability to be dialogic, diverse, and inclusive of all epistemologies from tribal to secular to minority worldviews.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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