

CHAPTER 6

Parental school choice: preferences for a *Jatiya Bidyalay*

6.1 Introduction

The two preceding chapters describe the contradictions that exist in the functioning of the small *Jatiya Bidyalay*. The field struggle compels the school to channel its energies to ensure the stability and survival of the school. The school has to compete with other schools to acquire and retain students. It tries to impress upon parents and guardians to have the schools chosen for enrolment and employ various techniques of promoting their schools, including informal ones like word-of-mouth techniques. It is here that parents become important agents who are expected to act like consumers and purchase the service of education for their children from the schools. Parents are implicated in the whole process and the success of these schools in retaining students depends on parental choices. The question of choice and parental preferences is therefore of paramount importance when we discuss school markets and their linkages with the language market. Since the schools in question are *Jatiya Bidyalay*, the important question is why are these schools chosen by parents, is it due to language, infrastructure, the private nature of these institutes, the fee, or any other? The chapter looks at parental accounts of reasons for choosing a JB. It is informed by three basic research questions? Why do parents choose a private school and not a government school? Why do they choose an Assamese medium school and not an English medium school and finally why do they choose a *Jatiya Bidyalay* and not any other private Assamese medium school?

During my stay at the school in 2022, I managed to speak to some parents about the question of choice. Some of these conversations happened after parent-teacher meetings and some happened after school hours with parents who came to collect their wards. The sample size is nine based on convenience sampling. This access was made possible because of my full-time work with the school which at the same time limited the opportunities to conduct a survey of the neighbourhood. This included parents of students from grades 5-10. The conversations ranged from 20-30 minutes wherein I probed the parents about choice. Out of the nine individuals spoken to, six were men and three were women. Out of the six men, five were self-employed and ran small businesses, one a

photocopy shop, one a mobile recharge shop, two small grocery shops and one a small garage owner. One worked as a driver. Out of the women, one was a cook whose husband was a caretaker in an apartment complex, one worked as a beauty worker, in a small beauty parlour whose husband was a driver, one worked as a cleaner in a government institution and the husband was a small businessman. All of them were Hindus and Assamese speakers.

6.2 School choice in India: English vis-à-vis Indian languages

The language question becomes an important one when it comes to private schools. Some scholars have tried to argue that the flight of students to private schools from government schools is due to the fact that these schools offer education in the English medium (Nambissan, 2010; Sarangapani and Winch, 2012; Jain et al, 2018). While other scholars like Tooley (2009) have argued that private schools are more efficient and cost-effective. The presence of a large number of private schools in Indian languages shows that English alone is not responsible for the migration of students to private schools. Such an argument is too simplistic. Similarly, when it comes to the *Jatiya Bidyalays* (JBs), to argue the opposite and say that these schools click only because they offer education in Assamese would be again too simplistic. Language or the medium of instruction matters but that's not the only factor that affects parental choice.

School choice is not a matter of simply making strategic rational choices. Benei's (2005) work in Maharashtra argued that emotional attachment to languages can affect school choices which might potentially conflict with socio-economic interests. The dialectical tension between interest and emotion might affect school choices. Other field studies have also demonstrated the multiple dimensions that affect school choice. In their work on school choice in Rasola in Rajasthan, Hill, Samson and Dasgupta (2011) suggest five main reasons that influence parental choice: supply, quality, cost, social barriers to entry and gender (Hill et al, 2011, p. 100). Their work, which focused on two government schools and two private schools in the said village, does not mention the medium of instruction of the private schools but it seems they are in Hindi medium. Describing the popularity of one of the private schools named JK Public, they write

‘It reflects the growing community attitude that private schools offer higher quality education than do government schools and the practical concern parents have about accessing quality Hindi-medium education’ (Hill et al, 2011, p. 102).

This offers some evidence that there is ample demand for private schools in Hindi medium in that village since the said school is the most popular among the four. Some other studies provide richer insights into the question of school choice.

Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay’s (2019) detailed study across 10 districts in the four states of Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand shows the complex nature of school choice. With their data, they claim that the medium of instruction- whether the school was English medium did emerge as an important and valued characteristic, especially for parents sending their children to private schools.

A very remarkable finding that they bring to light is that there exists a large discrepancy between parental reporting of English as a medium of instruction, the official medium of instruction as reported by schools and the actual medium of instruction in practice (Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay 2019, p. 55). In their study, 22% of children go to private schools whose school authorities report English as their medium, while 39% of children were reported by parents to attend private schools in English medium, while in actual practice the percentage of children going to private schools that actually use English as a medium is only 10% (ibid). Thus, there can be quite a big discrepancy between parents’ perceptions and the actual realities. Although the study highlights the importance of English as a medium of instruction, even in their work, their findings show that quality of teaching-learning formed the most important category of reasons among parents while deciding to send children to a particular school (ibid). From both studies, it seems that when it comes to the choice of a school, the perception of the quality of teaching and learning is of paramount importance for parents. In Assam as well, in the case of the JBs it is seen that perception of quality of education combined with sentiments for language are key factors that make parents choose a JB.

6.3 Brand value of a *Jatiya Bidyalay*

The competition among the three JB's that are located close to one another that was described in the last chapter and the fact that parents actively choose JB's shows that there is ample demand for schooling in such schools. But it must be noted that all of these schools are JB's, i.e. they use the brand of *Jatiya Bidyalay* in their school's name. The history of the JB's shows that JB became synonymous with Assamese education in Assam and there are a lot of sentiments attached to the term *Jatiya Bidyalay*. In a sense, one could say that the term has symbolic capital and that is the brand value of *Jatiya Bidyalay*. New schools are started by individuals, some with the aim of promoting education in the mother-tongue and some with the sole aim of getting students and profiteering but they use the term JB. The brand of *Jatiya Bidyalay* has some symbolic value and that is why it is used. The logic of the economic market however appropriates the term and uses it as a selling point. This brand symbolises good quality education in the mother-tongue. And this affects schooling choices. Schools often use the brand to highlight themselves as can be seen from their visual advertisements.

6.3.1 Visual advertising of *Jatiya Bidyalays*

Image 8 below shows three different advertisements used by three different JB's to showcase themselves. These are generally used just before the commencement of the new academic session. One could say that this is part of the 'cold knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) of the school, the formal way a school presents itself. Since they are synonymous with Assamese education, these ads are all written in pure, correct and standard Assamese. Chaise LaDousa (2014) in his work on schools in Varanasi has looked at the aspect of advertisements of schools. He has brought attention to the combination of lexical affiliation (Hindi or English) and writing system (Devanagari or Roman) that can be found virtually anywhere in urban centres of India (LaDousa, 2014, p. 113). He suggests that lexical and script combinations are tied to types of schools. Among private schools, rarely did schools advertise themselves as Hindi medium and these Hindi schools often used a variety of combinations, including the use of Roman script for Hindi words (ibid). Gurney (2018) in her study in Delhi also says that in her

study she found that majority of private schools advertised themselves as English-medium explicitly on their school signs or suggested so by using English for notices and in reception areas. She further says that the school visits however revealed that English was not a functional language in some of them, especially at the lower end of the fee spectrum. In Assam by contrast, private Assamese medium schools like the JB's and others as well, advertise themselves generally in standard Assamese and in the eastern Brahmi script. Rarely would one find a school advertisement using English or the Roman script or any combination. Also, they highlight the medium of instruction as Assamese and that is the main attraction. Many schools, including some JB's portray themselves as "Axomiya madhyam'r adarxo xikhanusthan" which translates to "Ideal educational institute in Assamese medium". This particular school did not use this tag line but it is commonly used by many others. Such posters or banners can be seen on the roadside and more particularly so on the main signboard attached to the school.

The catch is that these are ideal institutions of education for children and they are in the Assamese medium. These schools have a specific target audience and advertise themselves keeping in mind the audience. The use of the writing system or script deserves a mention in the advertisements of the JB's. The school advertisements of the JB's are also driven by monolingual and Puritan ideas of language. All these schools use the 'Assamese' script as it is often referred to in informal circles. It is referred to as *Asamiya lipi* (Assamese script) giving the impression that it belongs to the language alone. However, in a more technical sense, the script is nothing but the eastern Brahmi script which is common to Assamese, Bengali and Maithili. Given the historical tension of the Assamese with the Bengali, which was highlighted in the second chapter, the Assamese in order to distinguish from their Bengali neighbours use the writing system a bit differently by writing a couple of alphabets in a slightly modified manner.

The script is an extremely sensitive issue in Assam. Many times, controversies emerge due to the wrong usage of the script. If Assamese words are misspelled, they are widely condemned. But if they are misspelled and on top of that if it is due to the usage of the Bengali script, i.e. if one of Bengali alphabets is used, then it leads to widespread public

outrage that the sanctity and the sacredness of the language have been violated. The JB's therefore are very particular about this.

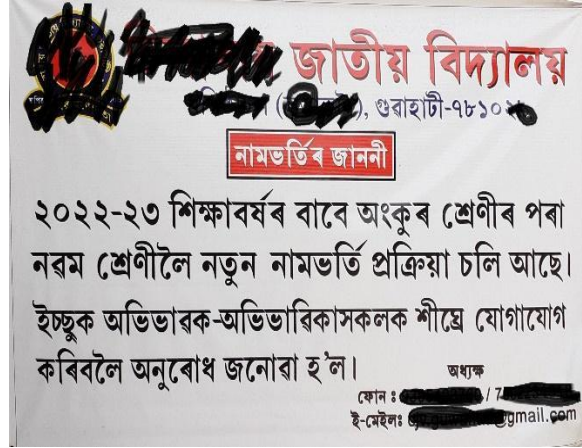
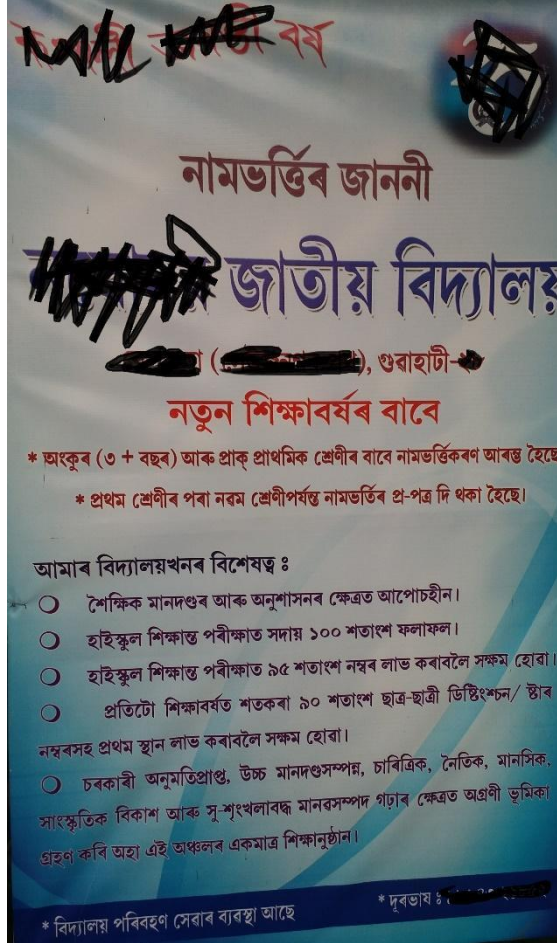


Image 8, 9, 10: Different types of advertisements used by different JB's for advertising their schools. Source: and picture credits: self-clicked.

That is why the ads are written in pure standard Assamese and in the correct script. Even the usage of the Roman script might lead to these schools' losing legitimacy. Therefore, unlike in Banaras where Hindi medium private schools might use Roman script in clever ways of advertising (LaDousa, 2014), in Assam that would be improper. To be an Assamese entails the usage the authentic language. Authenticity of the language is tied to the correct use of the language, the spellings, the accents and the script as well. The JB's are careful to follow this dictum.

6.4 The choice of a small *Jatiya Bidyalay*

My conversations with parents of the students from all the grades who attended the school gave an idea as to why this school was preferred by many and on a broader level, why a *Jatiya Bidyalay* was preferred. While language did emerge as one of the factors, it was not the only one. Many parents during the initial enrolment were often in a dilemma as to what kind of school to choose. This dilemma was sometimes in the context of the medium of instruction, whether to choose an English school or an Assamese school or it was in the context of which Assamese school to choose among the many. Also, it does not mean that once a school was chosen, all parents stick to it. Sometimes, given the circumstances and their financial health, they shifted their wards to other schools, even government ones if the situation demanded. There were many instances of migration from within schools, sometimes across medium or management. Many factors influenced school choice and they are discussed below.

6.4.1 Private vis-à-vis Government schools

As discussed earlier, India witnessed the expansion of the government school system from the 90s and especially from the 2000s onwards (Jain et al, 2018). However, most of the schools were understaffed and compromised on the quality of education, often resulting in the flight of students to private schools. There has been an increased differentiation in the schooling space, both among the private schools as well as the government schools. Thus, government schools are not a homogenous category nor are private schools. Vasavi (2022) provides a typology of such schools. Among the public schools, there are the government schools that are run by the department of education of the respective state government schools, the Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) schools or the central schools, the Navodaya schools and also the government aided schools that are run by private entities but receive government aids. Among private schools, there are unaided private schools, religious schools that are run by different religious organisations, alternative schools run by different civil society organisations and international schools that are affiliated to the central board and international boards (Vasavi, 2022). Thus, there

is a highly stratified schooling system in India catering to different classes and communities.

Schools are after all educational institutes and are judged as such. Most parents who chose the present school were driven by what they believed to be a quality education for their wards. It must be emphasised at this point that among the three JBs there, this school had the best academic performance in the last twenty years. So, there was some impression and reputation about the school. That government schools were out of favour among the parents and guardians was clear during my conversations within the school context described earlier. The lack of faith in government schools was a recurring theme in their conversations. Many of the parents said that the thought of sending their children to a state government school didn't come to their minds. It was understood and taken for granted that they would not send their children to such schools. Highlighting why private schools are better, one parent of a girl student in grade 9, an owner of a photocopy and a mobile recharge shop, said that,

“private schools are like businesses; they are bound to perform well. In private, there is competition, only if they deliver will people come to their schools. In my case, to do business you see, we have to keep at it, only then will my business grow. And in government, what happens is the government is providing, I am running it, there is no pressure. There must be some pressure. In government, you get a fixed salary, doesn't matter if the results are good or bad. But in private, you have to be engaged with the students constantly. The results have to be good. If my product is good, only then will my customers increase.” (Mr. P. 50s).

Mr. P. here alluded to the lack of accountability in government schools. When there is no accountability in these schools, the quality of education is bound to suffer. In comparison, there is always the struggle for survival which keeps private players on their toes and they therefore are bound to maintain their standards. Mr. P was convinced that private schools are better than government schools and he asserted that he was not at all keen to send his daughter to a government school and he was happy with the current school.

This lack of faith was even more reflected in the case of another guardian, Mr. B. 52, an owner of a neighbourhood *gelamaal* (a grocery or kirana) shop and a father of two twins,

a boy and a girl, who shifted them from a state government school to the present school after standard 8. On being asked why he took this decision, he said

“children’s minds need discipline, they need guidance. Since they are young, their minds wander, so discipline is important. Government schools lack the discipline, provide no guidance to students and there is no accountability towards students”.
(Mr. B, 52)

Mr. B, was also lamenting the quality of government schools and he blamed the present system of making all students progress to the next class as the main reason. He further said,

“the Sarba Shikhsa Abhiyan (SSA)²² that started in 2001 in Assam brought this change and it is not good. I myself had studied in a government school and the teachers were strict and good. In my younger years, I had to repeat a grade once and was not allowed to progress to the next grade and this is alright. Now everyone is allowed to pass by the government and that is not correct”. (Mr. B, 52).

Thus, for him, such government policies are unacceptable and therefore he had decided to enrol his two children, a pair of twins, a boy and a girl in KGFZJB from the nearby government school. He felt that the government schools have failed to maintain the quality of education and schemes like this which allows all students to be promoted to the next level, leading to carelessness on the part of the school. Thus, discipline was the prime reason for his shifting schools for his twins. He further said that he had researched about the present school and found out that the results were better, the teachers were strict, there was discipline and he is happy with the decision. He also suggested that in private schools since the number of students is less, students get more individual attention from teachers which is completely missing from government schools.

From the conversations with the parents, it seemed that there was a general perception that no learning takes place in government schools and in private schools, things are

²² The SSA or Education for all campaign started by the government of India aims to make education free and compulsory between ages 6-14. It’s a program for universal elementary education.

much better. The impression of a private school is not only dependent on academic results but also on the individual who is in charge of the school and his/her working style. For many parents, compared to the other JBs, this was a better one. The owner's reputation played a part in this impression. Sharma (2018) in her study of private schools in Delhi has examined the role of school principals in the impression management of the schools. She says that in the schools, although the wives of the owners were the principals officially it was their husbands who were actually the principal-in-action. She shows how the *de facto* principals made significant contributions to the image of the schools (Sharma, 2018, p. 246-250). Similarly, in the current school, the role of the owner, or the principal in action was significant. He was a government officer, and was perceived as *dangor manuh* (influential man), taskmaster and a strict disciplinarian. His physical punishments given to the students were considered legendary and known to all and he was known to bring out the best from difficult students. The academic results, which were among the best in the locality, also added to the perception. In this context, many parents wanted their children to be disciplined on academic matters and they often found themselves helpless to do so. It is then expected that the school would take the necessary steps to do it. This was amply demonstrated in the case of a parent, Mrs, A, a cook in her late 30s who told the owner about her son who was known to be mischievous.

“break his back if you have to but please improve him” (Mrs. A, late 30s).

Mrs. A's concern was mostly about discipline for her son. During my conversations with her, she requested me on similar lines and urged me to improve her son. It was here that she revealed that she could not expect this in a government school. The owner's reputation did play a role in her picking this school and not a government school.

For some parents, the exclusivity that a private school offer was an important reason to choose the present school. Mr. G, in his 40s, a small businessman who enrolled his daughter in the school said

“I never thought of a government school for my girl. I am ok with paying a fee, even a slightly higher fee for the present school since it is better than the rest and its performance is also better”. (Mr, G, 40s).

The ability to pay fees or even high fees allowed some parents to secure some form of distinction from others. For such parents like Mr. G, this dimension was a factor in picking a private school. Many scholars assume that exclusivity (and status) and English medium go together, but this need not be the case. In the era before there was mass education in the country, the very act of sending one's kids to a government school, while the majority of the population was illiterate, itself was a marker of distinction. Now, when everybody sends their kids to school, private schools, of whatever medium, allow some exclusivity and distinction for many individuals compared to those who can't afford to. Such class distinctions operate not just among the upper classes but equally so among the middle and lower classes as well. In this case, the fact that government schools provided a mid-day meal scheme and other private schools had lower fees than the one in question also served as a consideration for social status for parents like Mr. G. for whom these markers of distinction were important.

Not just parents, but even the teachers in the school commented on how no teaching takes place in government schools. In such schools, there are no rules, teachers idle away their time and no learning of the students takes place, they asserted. Such comparisons bring to mind the work of Tooley et al (2007) where they try to show that private schools are better performers than government schools and these opinions by parents point in that direction. But what was surprising was that while other parents also lamented the lack of quality in government schools, almost all of them had positive views of the Central School (Kendriya Vidyalaya) that is located not so far away. They thought of it not as a government school, but rather an English medium school, unlike the state-run government schools. Some of them even considered this school as an option for their children in the initial stages, although later they chose the present school. This shows that the angst that some parents have towards government schools was only towards the state-run schools and not towards all government schools, certainly not the elite central schools, which are held in esteem by them. State-run government schools were perceived to offer a lower quality of education.

6.4.2 Sentiments for language and culture

The state government schools are in the vernacular medium. The lack of faith in government schools does not necessarily mean that parents have given up on vernacular medium education. While parents were disillusioned with state government schools, which is generally in the vernacular medium, and their capacity to impart quality teaching and enforce discipline on their children, there was no love lost for the Assamese language as such. It seemed parents were only against the so-called poor-quality management of state government schools. Assamese medium schools were popular and this could be seen in their enrolment numbers. There were sentiments for the mother-tongue (Assamese in this case) that manifested in the choice of vernacular medium schools for their children. While academic aims and discipline were important factors, many parents openly confessed to their preference for Assamese medium education. There were ample examples of their sentiments for language and culture.

Mr. H, in his 40s, who was the owner of a grocery shop whose son and daughter study in school, said that he had never thought about English medium education for his children, ever. He said,

“English medium schools do not really know about the culture or practices of the community while Assamese medium schools do and they teach it to the students, which is good. Assamese schools teach children about our songs, music and folklore. In English schools, it is not done. I wanted my children to have an Assamese medium education”.

What Mr. H meant was that Assamese schools are rooted in ‘our’ culture and there the kids learn about certain aspects of the cultural life, be it regional folk stories, the songs of Bhupen Hazarika²³, the state anthem written by Lakshminath Bezbaruah which is generally part of the morning prayer or the celebration of many of the events and festivals which are dear to the community at large. One would not find these in any English medium school in Assam, be it the posh ones or the low-cost ones. His assessment seems

²³ Bhupen Hazarika was an Assamese singer and musician and is considered one of the key cultural icons of the modern Assamese community. He was awarded the highest civil honour by the Indian government posthumously for his contribution.

to be correct. As described in chapter 4, the school despite its limitations does make an extra effort to familiarise students about the national heroes and the larger culture of the community.

Another parent, Mr. S, in his 50s, a mobile recharge shop owner, confidently asserted,

“I have studied in an Assamese medium school and I also wanted my daughter to study in the same medium. In the initial days when we were thinking about a school for our girl, my wife wanted to enrol her in the nearby KV, but I was not interested as it was in English medium. I prefer the state board SEBA and not the central board, CBSE”. (Mr. S, 50s).

Mr. S’s comments point out his love for his language and he was very sure what kind of education he wanted for his daughter, going to the point of over-ruling his wife’s preference for a central school that could have been possibly a better option, both in terms of infrastructure and learning outcomes, but not probably in terms of being rooted in the cultural ethos of the region since CBSE curriculum have minimal references to local icons. His sentiments for the language are understandable as he often wrote Assamese poetry for newspapers. The love for *matribhasa* (mother-tongue) was present and it manifested very subtly and came out only during probing.

One parent, Mr. N, the owner of a photocopy shop and the father of a girl who studies in grade 5 of the school, had other reasons for picking an Assamese medium private school. He said,

“For a girl, it is better to be in the state board, SEBA and in Assamese medium. It is better in Assamese”. (Mr. N, 40s)

Mr. N did not openly profess his love for the language but it was clear during the conversation that he did have some sentiments for language and he wanted his girl to be taught the state board curriculum and in Assamese. Many others echoed similar sentiments. For many parents, owing to their middle and lower-middle class backgrounds, English was too distant. They do seek quality education but not necessarily in English. They do not necessarily have an English obsession. They send their children to private schools because they do not trust government schools due to perceived lower

quality. The distance that is felt with English can be clearly seen in the case of a student, a girl in grade 7 who had migrated to the present school in grade 2 from a private English medium school. On speaking to her father who was a driver, a man in his 40s, Mr. Q said,

“Yes, we did enrol her in an English medium school in the beginning. But she was not able to keep up. Her marks were very less and we felt she won’t be able to pass. Earlier we thought about English but my wife also said that it won’t be of any help”. My wife insisted that I shift her (our girl) to an Assamese school (Mr. Q, 40s).

Mr. Q’s example shows the dilemmas about school choice. After initially enrolling the girl in a private English medium school, they later shifted her to the present school due to her inability to cope up in the other school. It seemed that Mr. Q’s wife had some bit of sentiments for Assamese and it was on her insistence that he decided to make the move.

Other parents had more instrumental sense of languages and their choices were based more on strategic lines. Mrs. D, 32, who worked as a stylist in a small salon, whose two boys were in grades 5 and 8 respectively, said,

“Assamese is required nowadays, be it in government jobs or in general”.

What she meant was that in the state of Assam, to get a government job, language competency in Assamese is required. The state government conducts competitive exams in which there is a compulsory paper in Assamese to be cleared. This is true for lower-level jobs up to the higher ranks in the government bureaucracy²⁴. Instrumental views of the language or medium were also a reason for some to opt for Assamese medium schooling. Here, choosing an Assamese medium education was based on a strategic choice that would be more useful in the future.

One important point that must be noted is that these private Assamese medium schools do not portray the English language negatively in any way. This point is crucial. From the very beginning, starting from the first *Jatiya Bidyalay*, the focus of the schools has been

²⁴ The compulsory paper in Assamese in the state civil services exam has been removed by the state government in the year 2021, despite widespread opposition from some circles. Source: TOI. Dated 27. Nov. 2021.

to promote the idea that mother-tongue is the best medium of instruction for students. But that in no way entails an opposition to the English language. These schools actively promote that they will teach good English as well along with the mother-tongue. This point becomes significant when many parents claimed that the English teaching in the school was good and this was an additional reason for their choice of the school. Some of them took quite a bit of pride in the fact that their children could understand and write English very well. This shows that although parents did have some sentiments for Assamese, they didn't pit it against English in any way. They were pragmatic enough to understand the importance of a global language like English in today's times. One of the guardians was reflective of his decisions and wondered if an English medium education would have been better in terms of better life chances since the English language has a much wider reach. Such dilemmas were also seen.

6.4.3 Neighbourhood school

While management (private) and medium of instruction (Assamese) were important reasons for parents choosing a JB, monetary factors also came into play. While it is true that some parents displayed strong sentiments for the Assamese language, at the same time some parents did acknowledge that they wanted to send their children to reputed English medium schools but they were too expensive and too far away. Also, compared to the smaller low-fee English schools that were there, they preferred private Assamese schools like JBs. Their class background did not allow them to opt for the posh English schools and they didn't seem to have a very high opinion of the smaller English schools. Instead, they preferred a JB over the low-cost English schools. The fact that these JBs were in the immediate neighbourhood was also a big factor. And it was here that the class angle emerged clearly when it came to the question of school choice of a small *Jatiya Bidyalay*. The biggest advantage these schools had and why they were preferred by many is because they were located in the neighbourhood. Highlighting the importance of the neighbourhood school, Mr. N said,

“this particular school has a name in the locality, a reputation. I spoke to others about schools before opting and I found that it to be the best in this locality. I

wanted a school nearby because it is easier for me. Also, my daughter used a cry a lot and demands her mother. So, a nearby school is important. I can easily visit her. If she is in a far-off location, I cannot leave my shop and go to fetch her. I don't have any helper in my shop and I cannot leave the shop alone". (Mr. N).

Mr. N who had a photocopy shop in the neighbourhood used to sit in his shop the entire day. Because of his occupation, it was important for him to pick a school in the immediate neighbourhood that would allow him to visit the school in case his daughter needed it. The class and gender dimension emerges clearly here. Goswami's (2015) work on the gendered nature of school choice has brought to light how school choice for daughters is affected by parental concerns about security and discipline.

That the class position of the parents constrained and limited their choices of schools and made the neighbourhood school a desired one was reflected in the words of Mr. S. who said,

"we are not even middle; we are lower than middle. I cannot even think of sending my child to a school that is far from my place. There would be so many expenses, travel, and so on. We cannot afford. Also, my rented house is here, my business (shop) is here, so if the school is also nearby it is really a big help. The main reason we picked this school is because we heard it is a good school and it was very nearby to my place". (Mr. S).

Mr. S, who has a mobile recharge shop, made it clear that there was no way he could afford a school that was far off and the expenses would be too many, something he could never afford. Since his shop was also in the same neighbourhood, it was important for him to pick a school that was close by. The neighbourhood school was chosen because of the convenience it offered. The parents who generally work nearby, either in their own shops or elsewhere can easily drop and pick their kids from the school. Their lack of capital does not allow them to think beyond their immediate neighbourhood.

From the conversations with the parents, a few factors come out clearly. One is that there is a strong dislike for the state government schools and a preference for private management. This is mainly due to the perception of better quality of teaching and

learning in the private schools. Secondly, sentiments for language are also an important factor in the choice of a JB. And thirdly, the fact that these schools are small neighbourhood schools appeals to parents of a particular socio-economic background. In addition to these factors, social capital of the parents also played its part and many parents were influenced by their networks. Most of the parents' information about schools came from their informal networks (Gurney, 2018). Women especially seemed to play an active part in it, although men would also consult among themselves as to which school to choose for their kids. For example, among the parents sighted above, Mr. N. sought the opinion of Mr. S. when initially picking up the school for his daughter. Based on a positive recommendation from the latter, Mr. N. went ahead with his school choice. Ball and Vincent's (1998) notion of grapevine in the context of school choice is important. Since these are small schools in the neighbourhood, the word spreads out easily. There is emphasis placed on 'hot' knowledge or the unofficial information that is to be found in the informal networks (Gurney, 2018). In comparison, the 'cold' knowledge that is formal knowledge produced by the school is paid less attention to. If teachers are not present, if classes are not held regularly or if there are any incidents of misconduct by teachers, like harassment, including of a sexual nature, guardians get to know through their networks. Gossip therefore also played a role in school choice.

6.5 Conclusion

School choices are nuanced and many aspects affect these decisions. There is a lot of overlap among the factors that influence these choices. The above-mentioned points are highlighted separately only to bring focus to them but they overlap somewhere. To what degree they overlap will depend on the individual making the choices. In this chapter, the preference for a small *Jatiya Bidyalay* is examined. Unlike other studies which show that private schools advertise themselves as English-medium even though English is not a functional language within some schools (LaDousa, 2014; Gurney, 2018), these schools do not do so, since they emphasise that their medium of instruction is non-English, i.e. Assamese and that itself is the selling point. The desirability of these schools is certainly not due to English. The lack of supply of quality state government run Assamese medium schools makes many parents choose these privately run schools for their children. And

while making their choices, parents take various factors into account, constrained by their social locations. Academic aims are paramount for most parents, since after all, these are educational institutions. This combined with some attachment to the language (medium) along with the constraints that their social locations (class, to be more precise) bring to the whole equation make the neighbourhood school that provides education in Assamese medium an ideal choice for these parents. The choices are made not strictly in a strategic rational sense as some seem to argue and there seems to be some tension between strategic choice and sentiments for language. The main argument of the chapter is that school choice, in this case, is not determined solely by the medium of instruction, but also by other dimensions like affordability, location, perception of quality and class distinctions associated with payment of a fee.