

**SCHOOL MARKET AND MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION: A STUDY OF
ASSAMESE MEDIUM PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN KAMRUP
METROPOLITAN DISTRICT OF ASSAM**

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The present study is concerned with private schools and tries to examine the diversified nature of these schools by examining the embeddedness of these schools in their local context. Historically, the process of teaching and learning was mostly done by non-state actors, i.e. privately, be it in the West or in India. However, from the 19th century onwards the State has come to play an increasingly important role as a provider of education resulting in what is known as a ‘public monopoly education’. Of late, starting in the late 70s in the West and 90s in India, there has been a reversal with more private players entering the field of education. This is related to the rise of neo-liberalism as a political philosophy all over the world. As private players enter the field, there has been a steady movement of students from government schools to these private schools. Many of the studies on private schools have focused on the class dimension of these schools where the question of language (medium of instruction) becomes pertinent in the Indian context. Often, there is an assumption that English is the medium of instruction in most of the private schools, and it is considered a kind of cultural capital and therefore there has been a shift to these schools since government schools generally provide education in the regional Indian languages. But official statistics reveal that such an assumption is false and there are in fact a huge number of private schools that operate in regional Indian languages. Thus, although scholars have focused on the diversified nature of private schools, the linguistic dimension, especially the role of the regional Indian languages has largely been overlooked. It is with this backdrop that the present study aims to study private schools that operate in a regional and official Indian language, Assamese, in the state of Assam. Assam is a state where there has been a long history of language politics starting from the beginning of colonial rule and therefore it has affected the field of education as well. Thus, education, language, market and politics are firmly entangled in a complex web of relationships and the present study is an attempt to unravel the complexities to fill in some of the existing gaps in the literature on private schools and their dynamics. The study is concerned with a group of schools called the *Jatiya*

Bidyalyas in Assam. These are schools that were established privately in order to promote quality education in the mother-tongue (Assamese in this case). The broader objectives that inform the study are to explore the Assamese medium private school market in Assam with a focus on the JBAs, to examine language ideologies in such a school and to examine the organisational practices of one such school and how it survives in a competitive market. The key findings of each individual chapter are mentioned.

7.2 Key Findings (Chapter wise)

7.2.1 Private schools and language politics

In chapter two, a historical review of private schools in the state of Assam reveals that there has been a strong connection between the establishment of private schools and language politics of the region from colonial times. The European rulers imported with them distinct ideas about language that tied languages with identity thus engendering language-based communities. In this process, the colonial state's policy played a decisive role. When Bengali was made the language of the courts and schools in Assam from 1837 onwards, the medium of instruction became a contentious issue. Thus, the medium of instruction was tied up with the emergence of a politically conscious Assamese nationality from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It is seen that private schools established by the missionaries where the medium of instruction was Assamese, as compared to Bengali in state run schools, were instrumental in providing legitimacy to the Assamese language at a time when the language was considered a patois of the Bengali language. The numerous textbooks and grammars first written and compiled by the missionaries and later by the emerging Assamese middle-class helped the cause of the language and it was finally reinstated as the language of the courts and schools in 1873. During this period from 1837-1873 which is considered the dark ages in the history of the Assamese language, although the government encouraged the setting up of private schools by the grant-in-aid system, the schools were few as the medium of instruction was Bengali. Only after this dark period had passed that the number of schools jumped many-fold as mother-tongue education in Assamese inspired many individuals to set up such schools. The middle class was instrumental in this and they facilitated setting up many educational institutes, including those of higher learning in the state. This middle

class, however, always had a strong affinity towards the English language and English education and often considered it as a sound investment and were also prepared to pay for it. Thus, it is seen that although the middle class was the one that championed the cause of the Assamese language and were the chief architects of the Assamese nationality during colonial times, they were more receptive of the English language due to their self-interests.

After independence, the politics of language continued in Assam and was informed by the same monolingual ideas about language. The Indian state's language policies which were also informed by similar ideas were also responsible. The Assamese middle class envisioned a linguistically unified state and took steps to make Assamese the official language and the medium of instruction in the state. This led to many agitations, one after the other and the question of language and medium of instruction was a burning issue throughout those times. The loss of political territories in the form of the break-up of the state of Assam and the political atmosphere of the times led to a deep sense of existential crisis in the community. On the other hand, in the field of education, the government schools were not doing too well and many private schools came up, mostly in English medium. With many from the middle-classes abandoning the government schools and opting for English private schools, combined with the prevailing political atmosphere of the time led to a situation of crisis for the language. But at the same time, there were many who had sentiments for their 'mother-tongue' and they established private schools to promote mother-tongue education, thus following the same legacy that was in place for the last 200 years. The *Jatiya Bidyalays* are an outcome of this. The main argument of the chapter is that there are strong historical linkages between the establishment of private schools and language politics in Assam and that legacy of the colonial period is still present, be it the monolingual ideas of language, or setting up private schools to promote mother-tongue education and it is in this context that one has to locate the JB's that emerged from the 90s.

7.2.2 Assamese medium private school market and the changing nature of language politics

In chapter three, the mapping of the schools in Assam reveals that compared to government schools, private schools have grown at a much faster rate. It shows that this field is not homogenous and that there is a very large private school market in Assamese which is bigger than the private school market in English. At the same time, there is a sharp contradiction between rural and urban Assam. In urban Assam, the private schools in English are much more and so is the enrolment. The data shows the existence of disparate markets when it comes to schools in Assam thus showing the complexity and diversity of the schooling system. In terms of language, not only Assamese and English, there are private schools in Bengali, Hindi and Bodo as well, although their numbers are much less.

In the next section of the chapter, the private school market in Assamese is examined with a focus on the *Jatiya Bidyalays*. It is seen that the JBs are more than a thousand in number in the state and are found in almost all districts except the Bengali speaking ones of Barak Valley. The emergence of the schools is due to a combination of factors, primarily linguistic nationalism combined with the logic of the market along with good academic performance of some of the schools. Although there are a large number of such schools, only the first school, the AJB that was established, is a large school with proper infrastructure and transportation facilities. The majority are small schools that charge low fees and cater to the lower middle classes of the population. There is no centralised governing body of these schools and the field is fragmented. The AJB is the dominant player in this field and has many schools under its wings. By virtue of its possession of capital, financial and technological, it is able to set the rules of the game and numerous schools follow their guidelines. It is seen that the AJB actively encourages private initiatives to set up new schools all over the state. The main argument of the chapter is that the nature of politics has changed owing to the neo-liberal political philosophy where there is a reduced role of the state. While in earlier times politics was oriented towards the state and demands were made to the state, the reduced role of the state means more dependence on the market to fulfil demands. The establishment of the JBs can be

understood in this light and they spread owing to the perception of failure of the state in providing quality education in Assamese.

7.2.3 Contradictions between ideological goals and actual functioning of the school

In chapter four, one small low-cost *Jatiya Bidyalay* affiliated with the state board is examined. The school primarily caters to the lower-middle-class students, mostly Hindus and Assamese speakers. The school is viewed as an active site where the production and reproduction of language ideologies take place. It is seen that the school which was established to promote mother tongue education does take small steps, due to its limited capacity, in order to fulfil its ideological goals. There is ample emphasis on language, community, motherland etc. during the morning prayer. The school also follows monolingual ideas of language in its insistence on purity of language. On the other hand, remarkable flexibility is seen in actual practice when the language classes of Hindi and English are conducted in Assamese. It is found that Assamese is a language close to their hearts, even for the linguistic minorities, while English is a very distant one. For many students, English is too unfamiliar and hence they display a fatalistic attitude towards the language. The distance with English is also due to the fact that good English teachers are hard to find due to which English teaching remains sidelined compared to other subjects. While a few students did display eagerness towards English, for the majority, English did not have functional use and therefore were disinterested.

The school curriculum which has been designed by the AJB is in Assamese and there are numerous examples of the rootedness of the curriculum in the cultural ethos of the community. National heroes and icons, important religious sites and institutions, national festivals, local songs and music all find a place in the curriculum. It is designed in such a way as to make the students familiar with the cultural ethos of Assam and the school by following such a curriculum facilitates the process. The school also tries to celebrate events that are considered important for the community. But herein lies the contradiction. Due to its very limited resources or capital, it is not able to do much. The school, after all, is a low fees school that survives on the monthly fees collected from the students. In such cases, it has to organise or celebrate these events in a very frugal manner. The school is torn between its ideological goals and the constraints that the market puts on it. It tries to

do a balancing act, trying to survive and also contribute to mother-tongue education within constraints. The main argument of this chapter is that owing to the market logic under which the school operates, the ideological goals of the school take a backseat.

7.2.4 School functioning affected by market competition

In chapter five, the competition within the vernacular private school market is analysed by focussing on the survival of a small school. One neighbourhood of a locality is taken into consideration where there are three JB and the nature of competition between them to retain teachers and students is examined. It is seen that all the three JBs have a similar target audience, mostly lower- middle- class. When the school as a business organisation is examined, it is seen that as a small business, it struggles to survive and flourish. The lower-class clientele of the student population results in a massive challenge to collect fees on time which affects its everyday functioning. The school has to come up with innovative means to collect the fees like the use of dedicated templates that are sent to the parents of the students. Thus, most of its energies are diverted to activities like these. Being a low-fee private school where the collection of fees is quite a task leads to challenges in paying teacher salaries on time since there is no additional financial support. The teacher salaries are low and despite that, teachers are given pay cuts if they are absent for more than their allotted days.

There are many contradictions that can be seen in the working of the school. The AJB norms dictate that during teacher recruitment the proper procedures should be followed. For example, a written test and then an interview and the candidates appointed should have an Assamese medium education. But in reality, these norms are not always followed. This is due to the fact that there is a challenge in retaining teachers due to low salaries. Another contradiction is that there is a lack of teachers but at the same time, teachers are easily replaced in some cases from the oversupply of labour allowing to keep wages low. The lack of teachers is only for some subjects like English and Maths in higher grades and not for all. For others, they are easily replaced. It is seen that although the school is not able to pay much to its staff, in order to retain them, it provides them with some incentives like allowing them to take tuition classes inside the school which

gives an opportunity to teachers to earn an extra income. The market competition leads to the school using various tactics for spreading the word about the school, such as rallies and home visits by the teachers. It is also seen that all the JBs are in indirect competition with the market leader, the AJB and sometimes lose their brightest students to them. The market competition is brutal and leads to the energies of the school being diverted to ensuring its survival. The main argument of the chapter is that competitive markets affect the functioning of the school considerably, thus forcing the schools to focus on its survival rather than its ideological goals of delivering quality education in mother tongue. The argument follows from the last chapter - that there is a contradiction between the functioning of the school and meeting its ideological goals.

7.2.5 Parental school choice

In chapter six, the question of parental choice of a *Jatiya Bidyalay* is examined. Since these are private schools, their survival depends on parents who would choose such schools for their wards. It is also seen that the term *Jatiya Bidylay* has some kind of brand value in the specific local setting and therefore so many schools use it. A look at their visual advertisements reveals that most of these schools advertise in pure, correct and standard Assamese and try to portray themselves as ideal educational institutes in Assamese medium, thus using the medium as a selling point.

Based on conversations with parents in the school it is seen that choice of such schools has many shades to it. Things are not black and white. Most parents perceive government schools to be incapable of providing a decent education. Private education is considered a better option as some parents believe that in a private enterprise, there is some competition which is bound to keep management on its toes. It is bound to deliver, as some parents believed. Parents are concerned with the academic delivery of the school, and many times it was judged on the basis of the owner's reputation as someone who'd be able to reform their kids. For others, the language dimension is more important and they openly profess their desire to have their children educated in an Assamese medium school. That such schools are rooted in the cultural ethos is an important factor for some of the parents. The language question is not so clear cut. While some parents are very

sure that they'd prefer Assamese education for their children, others are more ambivalent. In the initial days when choosing schools, often there is a dilemma for parents as to what school to choose and also what medium of instruction. Parents negotiate such dilemmas by sometimes changing schools for their kids later on. Here, monetary factors also play a role. It is observed that the class background of the parents whereby they have limited capital or resources encourages them to choose small neighbourhood schools such as the one under study. A school far off would entail additional expenses. Thus, many factors affect the choice of a small JB and in this process, the informal networks come in handy for the parents. The main argument of the chapter is that school choice is not determined by the medium of instruction alone. Although the language or the medium of instruction is important, other dimensions like the entity being private and not government, class distinctions associated with payment of a fee, the school located in the neighbourhood along with the brand name of the school all affect parental choices.

Based on the key findings of the individual chapters, certain thematic conclusions can be drawn

7.3 Thematic Conclusions

7.3.1 Assamese nationalism and the *Jatiya Bidyalays*

Are the JBs a success or a failure? What role do they play in the educational scenario of Assam? What is likely to be their future? To answer the first question, if we consider the AJB, then it is a grand success. With a great track record, sound financial health, and a distinguished alumni network all over the world, it can be considered a success. However, the conditions are not the same with other small JBs functioning as the low cost schools. The study shows that there are contradictions in the workings of such schools and they face many challenges thus affecting their functioning and consequently their ability to meet their ideological goals. They are not very successful. However, just ensuring that the school survives and getting regular students helps the larger cause of Assamese nationalism in one way or the other.

Thus, although the small JBs are not very successful but, nonetheless, they do contribute and play an important role when it comes to education in Assam. The anti-CAA protests

in 2019-20 brought a new lease of life to these schools. The protests that started in Assam and spread to other parts of the country saw widespread sentiments for language in the state. The AJB and some of the other JB's were involved in the protests as well. While NEP 2020 sought to prioritise vernacular medium of instruction, the state government's proposal to teach Maths and Science in English in government schools could have affected these schools. Intervention by AASU and Assam Sahitya Sabha led to the introduction of bilingual books instead. Thus, suggesting the complexities of the interaction between market and State, the relationship between the two has never been simple when it comes to matters of medium of instruction in India.

The JB's are closely related to Assamese nationalism. Assamese nationalism has always been a weak nationalism and the middle-class Assamese who were the champions of this nationalism could never achieve hegemonic status. Also, due to the lack of a strong capitalist class, it could never be strong. However, the market-based politics has led to a change in Assamese nationalist politics as well. While JB's are only one example of Assamese nationalism and its reliance on market forces, there are numerous others. The Assamese today talk about "Aamar pothar, aamar bojar" (our fields, our markets). They talk about "axomiya lorai bojar dakhhal koribo lage" (Assamese boys should capture the market). The market has given a new lease of life to Assamese nationalism which otherwise has always been weak. How this plays out in the future remains to be seen.

7.3.2 The changing dynamics of school market and medium of instruction

The present study looks at the interplay of language, market, politics and schools. The institution of education, the organised activity of teaching and learning, which involves organised system of relationships between different statuses, namely teachers, students, parents etc. is associated with the transmission of culture and it helps in the reproduction of the culture of the larger society. Culture includes ideas and ideologies as a core component of it and thus linguistic ideologies are also reproduced by schools. The reproduction of language ideologies, however, has to be understood in the light of language markets since ideological constructions of language emerge from discrete language markets. Education in a state like Assam, has near monopoly over reproducing the language market and hence over language ideologies. The institution of education is

therefore deeply implicated with the politics of language, i.e. it is only education that can help to legitimise certain varieties of languages and reproduce the language market. Education, however, has undergone tremendous change due to the influence of another institution, namely the market. Market forces have completely altered the way the relationships were patterned in the past. There are now more and more private players when it comes to the provision of education. These dynamics have direct consequences on the politics of language. *The Jatiya Bidyalays* that emerged from the 90s onwards are firmly and deeply enmeshed in the politics of language. They play a role (along with the state government schools) in reproducing the Assamese language market. However, the fact remains that these are private schools and do not receive any financial assistance from the government. They operate under the logic of the market and this logic under which these schools operate consequently affects the language market, and subsequently the language ideologies. The politics of language, therefore, is now less state oriented and more oriented towards the market. The market seems to have the capacity to confer legitimacy to causes. The success of a school that operates under market conditions might signify that it has a legitimate cause. In this whole process, teachers, parents and students are involved as they are the main actors in this process, each constrained and enabled through their own respective positions.

7.3.3 Social embeddedness of private schools

The private schools under study and their dynamics enabled some reflections on economic institutions – markets and economic actions of organisations and individuals. The private schools called *Jatiya Bidyalays* are not just economic entities but equally social and political entities. Although they operate under the logic of the market they are mediated by social and political factors. The social actions of individuals can also be viewed from a similar framework. When parents choose to send their children to school it is not just an economic action but equally a political one. Thus, there is nothing called a pure economic action as mainstream economics would suggest. Rather, all economic actions are socially embedded (Granovetter, 1985). The social context affects the economic action of actors and also the establishment of economic institutions like private schools. When we analyse the JBs in the context of Assam, to view them just as private

institutions and to explain the phenomenon in terms of economic variables alone would be inadequate. Other social-political variables like language have to be taken into account for a sufficient explanation

7.3.4 Flaws in the market-based model of education

The study analysed the market-based model of education by examining one private school in detail. Here, there was an attempt to look at the supply side of the market which has remained less examined in Indian studies on the school market. It is seen that there are some serious challenges that a small school has to go through. The ruthless competition of the market forces them to divert their energies to ensure the survival of their firm. In such cases, the aspect that suffers the most is the quality of education. The lack of teachers for some subjects like English results in students developing fatalistic attitudes towards the language. The low salaries of the teachers combined with the difficult conditions of work often force the teachers to make a switch to other schools when they get a chance. In such instances, students have to adapt to new teachers and their learning is disrupted. Here, again the question of quality of education comes into play. While no doubt some of these schools are doing well, is it fair to assume that private schools that operate under extremely competitive market conditions can provide quality education? The present study suggests that it is challenging.

So, can the present study contribute anything to the debate on public-private model of education? Yes, the present study problematises the common-sense notion that private schools always offer quality education. It acknowledges the fact that private education has in fact and can further lead to an even more stratified education system in terms of caste, religion or language apart from class. So, the study, while critiquing the market-based model of education, at the same time, does not endorse a public monopoly over education for all since in a pluralist conception of the state, a public monopoly education can lead to dominant interest groups dictating the government policy as Chub and Moe (1990) suggests.

7.4 Policy implications

As demonstrated in the study, it was monolingual ideas of language that led to nationality formation and the medium of instruction becoming a contentious issue in the past. The Indian state's policy has also been informed by similar ideas. While it is true that the Indian state has advocated a three-language formula, in principle it is often seen, as in the present study, that monolingual ideas continue to dictate classroom practice. Scholars like Agnihotri, Annamalai and Pattnaik have been advocating a multilingual approach to education, although it is easier said than done. The New Education Policy of 2020 also advocates on similar lines. Multilingualism is a promising endeavour but there are some potential challenges. Since many of our lived realities are of colonial origin be it linguistic identities or fixed caste identities, one wonders if it would even be possible to get rid of such notions. In the case of linguistic identities where languages are conceived as a property of a group, will a multilingual education be acceptable to all sections of the public, especially in those areas where language is a primary marker of group identity? These are important questions and have to be deliberated upon. But it can be agreed that multilingualism is the way forward where languages are seen as resources and capital and all can partake in this rich treasure.

7.5 Future Study

The present study has examined the diversified nature of private schools in India and unravelled the nature, spread and the vulnerabilities of the low-fee private schools in Assam. While choice is not a simple act, and people do not act simply as a rational actor when it comes to schooling, language remains an emotive issue for them. Due to constraints of time and resources, one could not examine the political organisations that continue to affect the operations of the school market. At a time when marketisation of education is assuming newer forms, I would like to examine the role of civil society organisations in affecting the dynamics of the school market in my future study. For example, the powerful literary organisation in Assam, Assam Sahitya Sabha, initiated its own set of private schools called the Adarsh Vidyalaya. Such developments hold clues to understanding the dynamics of market, State, and civil society organisation in shaping the educational markets.