

Abstract

In the welfare model of the modern State, education of the citizens is perceived as the responsibility of the State. Recent developments have complicated this relationship with the ascendance of neo-liberalism as a political philosophy and policy paradigm since the 80s. There has been an expansion of private schools all over the world. In India as well, school education has seen a massive transformation (Jain et al, 2018). Overall, there has been a trend of differentiation among schools and the education system has become highly fragmented. The proliferation of different types of schools has led to an increasing complexity of the schooling system (Vasavi, 2022). Private schools are now ubiquitous in India and are found in every nook and corner of the country. For the year 2018-19, almost half (around 49%) of the school going population was enrolled in a non-government school (UDISE Dashboard, 2018-19). In administrative terms, this includes the private aided schools, the unaided schools (recognised as well as the unrecognised ones), and other non-government schools. There is also a wide spectrum of private schools in terms of fee structure, from the elite schools with high fees to the very low-cost ones, schools run by charitable trusts, ‘edupreneurs’ or corporate bodies, voluntary organisations, missionaries, philanthropic bodies or individual owners, catering to varied social classes (Mehendale and Mukhopadhyay, 2018). It is, however, the rapid growth of the low-fee private schools that seems to have contributed to the expansion of the private school system (Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay, 2019; Jain et al, 2018). The diverse nature of private schools reflects the existing inequalities in Indian society (Jain et al, 2018).

In India, starting from the 80s, the urban middle classes, and the lower middle-class fractions and sections of the working class started exiting the government schools in favour of a range of private unaided schools (Nambissan, 2010, 2012; Jain et al, 2018). That the private schools are no longer sought after just by the well-to-do classes but also by the lower and the poorer classes has been highlighted by many (Tooley et al, 2007, 2009; Baird, 2009, Joshi, 2008 etc as cited in Nambissan, 2012). Some commentators seem to believe that the decline of government schools, the corresponding demand for private schools is because they offer education in English, a language that signifies ‘cultural capital’ and promises socioeconomic mobility. In other words, the medium of instruction in English was emphasized as the key factor that drives demand for private

schooling (Nambissan, 2012; Jain et al, 2018, Vasavi, 2022). In popular discourse in India, ‘private school’ implies two main features, the use of English as a medium of instruction and the requirement of a fee which conveys exclusivity and social status (Sarangapani and Winch, 2010). Thus, private schools are often equated with some form of exclusivity, social status and English medium education in India.

This perception, however, is misleading and can obscure the fact that there exists a large number of private schools in Indian languages and they cater to a significant population. On an all-India level, the data from UDISE+ reveals that more than 61% of the private unaided (recognised) schools for the year 2018-19, offer an Indian language as a medium of instruction, while English medium schools account for only about 39%. There are many such private schools that emphasise education in the mother-tongue. That private schools are functioning in and are associated with the sentiments around regional languages has not received much attention in academic circles (Medhi and Goswami, 2023). Some studies have highlighted the complex relationship between education and language in states like Maharashtra where language sentiments are quite high and private schools in vernacular medium have seen a rise along with English schools (Benei, 2005). The existence of multiple, often competing markets, when it comes to private schools which might be in different languages (medium) has been stressed in some studies (LaDousa, 2005, 2007, 2014). The medium of instruction, which refers to the languages in which instruction and curricular materials are offered, holds salience across the nations of South Asia but surprisingly there is very little scholarship available (LaDousa, 2022).

Moreover, the fact that private schools might have different ideological moorings is often overlooked. While there have been many studies of some private schools in regional languages with distinct ideological leanings affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (Froerer, 2007; Bhuyan and Goswami, 2021; Bhuyan, 2023), not many have explored the private schools that are of a different ideological background, especially the ones pertaining to regional sentiments around language. In the state of Assam, which has a long history of language politics, language ideologies have shaped much of the political history of the state for the last 200 years. This has implications for how private schools capitalise on the perceived need for quality schools in the Assamese language. The

reduction in the role of the state and increasing importance of the market in education has led to the emergence of a very large vernacular private school market.

Furthermore, while there is a lot of literature on the spread and popularity of low fee private schools across India and counter arguments to such claims, little is known about these schools as organisations that exist in competitive environments. On one hand, some studies have highlighted the role of the non-state actors in education in the global south, the equity effects of such schools (Kingdon, 1996; Kingdon, 2007; Srivastava and Walford, 2016), the relatively better quality of education that low fee private schools provide compared to government schools (Tooley et al 2007; Tooley, 2009). On the other hand, numerous studies have raised critical questions regarding such claims arguing that there is little evidence of the promise of high-quality education from such low fee private schools (Sarangapani and Winch, 2010; Nambissan, 2010; Nambissan, 2012; Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay, 2019). The studies with a pro private school predisposition all seem to operate under the notion of ‘outcome as quality’ (Jain et al, 2018) but through what processes the quality of education is maintained (or not maintained), when the fee is low, is not addressed properly. This is because most of the studies are based on surveys and are not on in-depth ethnographic studies of private schools embedded within their social context. Also, the role of the teachers in making a key difference in the performance of such schools is often highlighted but seldom examined from their perspective. A detailed ethnographic study of the school as an organisation along with the various actors, therefore, becomes imperative in such cases. An insider’s view can provide valuable insights on the functioning of such schools.

The present study, therefore, aims to look at the dynamics of private school market at a regional level (the state of Assam in India) by focusing on an educational institute (a small low fee private Assamese medium school) and tries to locate the individual actors in this web of relationships. The study is concerned with a particular group of private schools called *Jatiya Bidyalayas* (literally Assamese nationalist schools) that number more than a thousand in the state.

Objectives

- 1) To explore the spread and variation within the private school market in Assam with a focus on *Jatiya Bidyalayas*.
- 2) To examine the organisational practices of a low fee Assamese medium private school and how it functions and survives in a competitive market.
- 3) To examine the language ideologies in a small low fee private Assamese medium school.

Review of Literature

For the present study, existing literature on marketisation of education, private schools, language markets, school choice, changing nature of teachers work etc. have been reviewed. For a better understanding of the private school market in Assam, I have reviewed the history of education in Assam with particular focus on language politics in Assam.

The study aims to examine private schools of a particular ideological kind and is informed by the notion that ‘the emergence of private schools is not just an economic process but it is simultaneously a political process’ (Jain, 2018). The politics and history cannot be ignored in the discussion on private schools as done by those using a strictly economic lens (ibid). Therefore, historical and socio-political specificities are paid attention to. Manish Jain’s essay on ‘Public, private and education in India: A historical overview’ problematizes the notion of public and private in education and provides a historical backdrop as to how these terms evolved over time (2018).

Selected works of Stephen Ball (2003) like ‘Education Markets, Choice and Social Class: The Market as a Class Strategy in the UK and the USA’, and Raewyn Connell’s (2013) ‘The neoliberal cascade and education: an essay on the market agenda and its consequences’, and James Tooley’s (2009) *A Beautiful Tree*, helped in understanding the changing nature of relation between state, market forces and education, especially how the market has affected schooling options, both globally as well as in India. Tooley’s work highlights how private schools are becoming popular in various parts of the world,

be it in African countries like Kenya and Ghana and also in Asian countries like China and India.

Numerous works on private schools and school choice in the Indian context, namely by Geetha Nambissan (2010), Sarangapani and Winch (2012), Prachi Srivastava (2013), Hill et al (2011), Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay (2019), Gurney (2018), Vasavi (2022) etc. show the nature of functioning of private schools in the country as well as the nuanced dimensions of school choice. Meenakshi Thapan's *Life at School* (2006), *Ethnographies of Schooling in Contemporary India* (2014) provide rich insights into the actual functioning of schools. Why parents choose private schools is an important question. But equally important is how do teachers, who form the bedrock of the schools, negotiate the schooling process. Works by Andy Hargreaves (2000), Krishna Kumar (2005), G.G Kingdon (2010), Achala Gupta (2019) and others highlight the changing contours of teachers' work currently as well as historically.

Veronique Benei's (2005) 'Of Languages, Passions and Interests: Education, Regionalism and Globalisation in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, 1800-2000' looks at the interplay of language sentiments and school choice in Maharashtra, suggesting how language choices mediate and affect school choices. Chaise LaDousa's (2014) *Hindi is Our Ground, English is Our Sky: Education, Language and Social Class in Contemporary India* and Nirmali Goswami's (2017) *Legimitising Standard Languages: Perspectives from a School in Banaras* reveal the dynamics of language markets in north India.

H. K. Barpujari's (2004-07) historical works, *The Comprehensive History of Assam (vol I-V)*, *American Missionaries and North-East India (1836-1930)*, Archana Chakravarty's (1971) PhD thesis on *History of Education in Assam (1826-1910)*, Amalendu Guha's (1991) *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, Sanjib Baruah's (1999) *India Against Itself*, Banikanta Kakati's (1941) *Assamese, its Formation and Development*, Devavrat Sharma's (2006) *Asamiya jatigathan prakriya aru jatiya janagusthigata anusthan samooch (Process of Assamese nationality formation and regional community-based institutions)*, Hiren Gohain's (1973) 'Origins of the Assamese Middle Class', Uddipan Dutta's (2012) PhD thesis *The Role of Language Management and Language Conflict in the Transition*

of Post Colonial Assamese Identity and numerous other works helps to contextualise and understand how education in Assam has been shaped by the politics of language. The role of civil society and the middle class in the process is also reviewed through these works.

The literature cited above has been of immense help in investigating the research problem and articulating the major arguments of the study.

Theoretical Approach

This work draws on sociological studies of school, market and idea of choice within neoliberal regimes and combines it with insights drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social space and practice, and Fligstein's ideas about markets to understand how private schools function in disparate markets.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice – habitus, field, capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) helps in explaining action and practices of actors. The concept of language ideologies is useful in explaining the importance of ideas about language that shape much of the politics of language. David Harvey's idea of neo-liberalisation as well as Stephen Ball's ideas on marketisation of education helps in explaining the neo-liberal turn in education all over the world.

It is important to note that education is deeply implicated in the politics of language in postcolonial societies like India. In Indian context, Hindi, English and a number of languages have been recognised for school education. Indian education policies have, likewise, been invested in promotion of official languages at national and state levels creating a complex field of power relations at symbolic and material level. It is this interrelationship between language, education and the market the present study intends to probe. To do this, the operation of markets, both economic, as in the education market and symbolic, as in the linguistic market, drawing from Bourdieu's concept of fields, is examined.

In the present study, the field of education and subfields within this field and the relationship with linguistic fields (markets) are looked at. Bourdieu (1991) in the context of France conceptualised a unification of the linguistic market with the education market and the labour market that led to a language becoming normalised. He 'envisioned the

state's creation of a national system of education as a means to involve citizens in a unified market' (LaDousa, 2005). Kathryn Woolard's work suggested the lack of unification and existence of multiple language markets in the context of Spain, major ones being those of Castilian and Catalan (ibid). In the Indian context as well, instead of a unified market, there seems to be the presence of disparate and often competing linguistic markets (LaDousa, 2005; Brass, 2004).

Methodology

To understand the interplay of school education with the market in the context of Assam, I have looked at *Jatiya Bidyalaya* as a network of Assamese medium private schools and focused on the practices and ideological moorings of one such school located in the Kamrup metropolitan area.

The study is located in the urban space of Kamrup, which has been the administrative centre of the state of Assam and an important site to examine the expansion of school education and language politics in the region. Also, the *Jatiya Bidyalay* movement originated here and the first school was established here in 1994. The city has a number of *Jatiya Bidyalays* that allows one to observe field dynamics, especially the competition among these schools. The study makes use of both primary data and secondary data in order to understand the spread of private schools in the state of Assam and the variations within them. It then focuses on the functioning of a small private school that is affiliated with the *Jatiya Bidyalaya* network.

The methodological orientation of the research is qualitative. The method employed is the field study method (ethnography) and the techniques of data collection are primarily through participant observation, complemented with conversations and interviews and group discussions once in a while. For mapping out the nature and extent of private schools in the state, secondary data, in quantitative format, from UDISE+ was requested and analysed for variations in terms of caste, gender and religion. This provides a bird's eye view of the state of schools in Assam which is complemented by the worm's eye view from the ground by employing an ethnographic approach to gather primary data. A field ethnography has its limitations in terms of generalisability, but the rich insights that

it engenders, if complemented with the broad level data, does allow one to see a more wholesome picture of the phenomenon under study.

The choice of the school as a unit of study was based on purposive sampling. All the *Jatiya Bidyalays* in Guwahati were mapped out using data available in UDISE+. Initially, in the year 2019, a survey of around seven schools were done to get an idea of the schools. Since majority of these schools were small schools, one such school was purposively selected that was established in the early phases of the *Jatiya Bidyalay* movement and also one that is part of the network of the original school, the *Assam Jatiya Bidyalay*. Permission was sought from the school and as part of the arrangements, the school allowed me to conduct my research on the condition that I be engaged as a proxy teacher (without pay) and take classes during my stay there. The study therefore, is an insider's account based on data that was collected from a small *Jatiya Bidyalay* (a private school of Assamese medium) in the year 2022, from the months of April to September. Initial fieldwork started in the year 2020 but was stalled due to the Covid pandemic for two years. Only in 2022 when Covid pandemic had subsided and schools reopened completely could I begin fieldwork again and continued for six months duration. My insights about the functioning of the low fee private schools and its inner dynamics are based on a participant observation method. I worked in the school as one of the substitute teachers during this period. The classroom interactions with students, staff room interactions with teachers, my own observations in the school, conversations with parents, the gossip in the tea-stall and elsewhere with teacher friends, and more formal interviews with some of the other teachers are the sources of data for my field study. I realised early on that informal conversations with the participants were more effective than formal interviews, as during interviews there was a tendency of participants to get too conscious. Therefore, interviews were used only sparingly. No audio or visual recordings were done during the course of the study in the school as it was deemed unfit. The data was recorded via handwritten short notes in the field diary. This study is more focused on the teachers' and parents' perspectives, but nonetheless students' accounts are also taken into consideration.

Since I was an insider and part of the school, I was constantly aware that my actions could affect the dynamics inside the school. My status in the school was that of a substitute/proxy/temporary teacher for a few months who was supposed to take English classes in the higher grades, and fill in for absentee teachers, whatever class that may be. In terms of ethics, particularly when it came to permissions, informed consent in oral form was sought from the owner, the principal, teachers, parents and students. I made it clear to each category of people that I was a researcher, a doctoral student, and that I am studying such small schools and that I would write about it.

Results and Discussion

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the research problem. The theoretical and methodological orientation of the research is discussed here.

The second chapter explores the field of education in Assam and traces its historical trajectory from the beginnings of colonial rule. The colonial system of education along with the role played by the missionaries is looked at. It looks at the history of vernacular medium education in the region and the development of Assamese as a medium of instruction in schools. The politics of languages in the region that influenced the development of the education system during this time is analysed. The decades after independence culminated in the flourishing of a large number of government and private owned schools in the Assamese medium. It is in this context that one has to locate the emergence of the schools called the *Jatiya Bidyalays* in the 90s which later on became like a movement for quality education in Assamese language.

The third chapter examines the field of the private schools in Assam. Using secondary data, the schools in the state are mapped out. The data reveals that when it comes to private schools, unaided as well as unrecognised schools, the number as well as enrolment in Assamese medium schools is more than that of English medium schools unlike commonly held perception. With this backdrop, the chapter then looks at the field of private schools in Assamese medium. In this field, there are different types of schools such as the *Sankardev Sishu Niketans* that are of another ideological orientation, affiliated

with the RSS, as well as other schools that cannot be strictly categorised ideologically. But the focus is only on the schools called the *Jatiya Bidyalays*. The chapter dwells on the history of the first *Jatiya Bidyalaya* and the gradual spread of these schools.

The fourth chapter introduces the school under study. The school, a small Assamese medium private school, named (fictionalised) *KGFZ Jatiya Bidyalay* (KGFZJB) is a part of the network of *Jatiya Bidyalayas* (JB) established in the year 2000. It discusses the school profile, the composition of students, the ideological orientation and the everyday practices inside the school.

The fifth chapter examines the competitive field of the school market in a neighbourhood. The school functions as a small business and its survival strategies are probed. Tactics for fee collection, recruitment and retention of teachers, advertising and the achievements are revealed in this chapter. It also examines the changing nature of teachers' work in the school and their adaptations to a changing work environment are probed.

The sixth chapter explores the parental choices by examining the various factors that lead the parents to opt for a *Jatiya Bidyalay*. The final chapter discusses some of the general findings and provides concluding points of the thesis. The study adds to scholarship on the diversified nature of private schools by highlighting regional dimensions of such schools in Assam.