CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 The Research Problem

In the welfare model of the modern State, education of the citizens is perceived as the responsibility of the State. But 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 with a reduced role of the state. 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 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). This includes the private aided schools, the unaided schools (recognised as well as the unrecognised ones), and other non-government schools. There's a wide spectrum of private schools, 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 all the 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 the 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 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 is 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%. That private schools are functioning in regional languages and that some of them even emphasise language sentiments 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). As such, there is a need for caution against the allegedly popular craze for English medium instruction (ibid). The existence of multiple, often competing markets, when it comes to private schools which might be in different languages (medium) have been stressed in some studies (LaDousa, 2005, 2007, 2014; Goswami, 2017). 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 with distinct ideological leanings that are functional in regional languages like those affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (Froerer, 2007; Bhuyan and Goswami, 2021;

Bhuyan, 2023), not many have explored private schools that are of a different ideological background, especially a regionalist one. 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 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 Bidyalays* (literally Assamese nationalist schools) that number more than a thousand in the state.

The research problem formulated above is guided by the following research questions.

1.2 Research Questions

1) What are the linkages between language ideologies and the private school market?
2) How does identity politics impinge upon the privatisation of schools?
3) How does market competition affect the functioning and quality of education in low fee private schools?
4) How do regional vernacular schools respond to the privatisation of education in India?

The research questions lead to the following research objectives.

1.3 Research Objectives

I. To explore the spread and variation within the private school market in Assam with a focus on *Jatiya Bidyalays*.
II. To examine the organisational practices of a low fee Assamese medium private school and how it functions and survives in a competitive market.
III. To examine the language ideologies in a small low fee Assamese medium private school.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This work draws on scholarly work on school, market and idea of choice within neoliberal regime and combines it with Bourdieu's theory of social space and practice to understand how private schools function in disparate markets.

David Harvey's idea of neo-liberalisation as well as Stephen Ball's ideas on education market help in explaining the neo-liberal turn in education all over the world. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of language and power and linguistic markets are helpful for

understanding language politics. The concept of language ideologies is useful in explaining the importance of ideas about language that shape much of the politics of language. Bourdieu's theory of practice – habitus, field, capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) helps in explaining action and practices of actors. Field theory of Bourdieu, further improvised by Neil Fligstein helps in viewing markets as fields.

1.4.1Education and market

Neo-liberalism, according to Harvey (2005) is a 'theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). The role of the state in a neo-liberal set up is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (ibid). It seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market (ibid). The philosophy of neoliberalism seeks to free businesses and industry from state controls and it seeks to make existing markets wider and to create new markets where they did not exist before (Connell, 2013, p. 100). Along with other sectors, education as a sector has also been tremendously affected by neoliberal political, economic and cultural agenda (ibid). Neoliberal policies, where market principles are applied to the education sector have led to what is known as marketisation of education. Marketisation is used to refer to a trend in education policy from the 70s-80s (in the West) where schools were encouraged to compete against each other and act more like private businesses rather than institutions under the control of the local government. Here, educational institutes are re-imagined and redefined as firms competing with each other for students; education is defined as an industry and educational institutes have been forced to conduct themselves like profit seeking firms (Connell, 2013, p.102).

Education, thus has been tremendously affected by the market in recent times. The market model of education is characterised by the notions of choice, competition and privatisation. In this model 'parental choice and school competition are seen as ways of achieving reform and raising standards while at the same time reducing State intervention into education planning' (Ball, 1993, p.3). Privatisation of education here refers to the process where the state resources (of education and educational services) are utilised to

create a market for private players. The present study is concerned more with understanding the nature of the private school market in vernacular language that exists in Assam and understanding the functioning of a private school in the face of competition from other such schools.

Ball (1993) provides a model of the education market in the context of the United Kingdom. He narrows down on social class and suggests that in an education market, the strategic processes of choice systematically disadvantage working class families and that the link between choices and resources (via per capita funding) disadvantages working class schools and communities (ramifying and interacting with other collective consumption inequalities) (Ball, 1993, p.12). That is, in other words, the operation and effects of an education market benefit certain class groups and fractions to the detriment and disadvantage of others (ibid). Ball further claims that the implementation of market reforms in education is essentially a class strategy which has as one of the major effects the reproduction of relative social class (and ethnic) advantage and disadvantage (Ball 1993, p.4). He further argues that the ideology of the market actually works as a mechanism of class reproduction in several ways. First, it assumes that the skills and predisposition to choice, and the cultural capital which may be invested in choice, are generalised. Second, it legitimates differences in these by labelling non-choosers and poor choosers as bad parents. And thirdly, the education market doubly disadvantages the poor chooser (and the minority chooser) by linking the distribution of resources to the distribution of choices (ibid, p.13). And a system of exclusion and differentiation is created which reasserts and ramifies the relative advantages of the middle and upper classes within State education. So, according to Ball, overall, the market works as a class strategy by creating a mechanism which can be exploited by the middle classes as a strategy of reproduction in their search for relative advantage, social advancement and mobility (Ball, 1993, p. 17).

Ball further suggests that when it comes to the education market, the emphasis is on choice, i.e. on the demand side but less is talked about the behaviour of the producers in the market (Ball, 1993, p. 6). Also, the mechanisms of institutional survival in the market, i.e. competition is often overlooked (ibid). ‘The values of business and competition’ are

not readily discussed (ibid). Ball suggests the imperfect nature of markets and reminds us that markets are after all socially and politically constructed (ibid, p. 8). He problematises the application of market theory to the education system and highlights the issues of power and political structure in explaining economic institutions. He claims that under conditions of competitiveness, power accrues to the producer, to the agents on the short side of the market. (ibid, p.11) That is the suppliers, in this context, schools are in a more advantageous position compared to the consumers, the parents. However, in many parts of the US and the UK, there is a surplus of schools and same set of students and it is this excess of schools that drives the market and creates competition between institutions (ibid). At the same time, there are some schools that are oversubscribed and since they have the power to choose students, they have power in the market (ibid).

Overall, Ball's work underlines the changing nature of class politics in the domain of education in the UK and is focused on the strategies of the middle class. His notions of the education market are vital in comprehending the changing nature of education and highlighting the central importance of class in the context of Western countries, like the UK and the US. However, John Beck (2007) points out the contradiction that exists in Ball's work with Ball's fuzzy definition of the middle-class and at the same time it's collective disposition to act strategically to secure positional advantage. He says that it is unpromising to essentialise the middle class and reduce middle-class involvement in education to a collective zero-sum game of struggles for positional advantage (Beck, 2007, p. 41). Noting the criticisms above, I use Ball's ideas with caution. Moreover, in many countries in Asia and Africa, things are more complicated, especially in India where the study is located. While class remains important, it is the politics of caste, religion or language that is more prominent in India. Furthermore, class politics especially working-class politics is marginalised because labour and capital, the two historical adversaries are politically marginal due to the dominance of the third actor – the Indian State (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987, p. 20). In India, it is the concept of 'community' that has immense potency. The community, be it of caste, religion or language allows one to understand the politics better. It is the feature of 'sense of belonging' to the group from which the concept derives its potency. In the state of Assam where this study is located and the schools under study that are literally called *Jatiya*

Bidylalays (community/nationalist schools), the politics of language is a primary feature. The linguistic community therefore holds salience. The study is concerned with the intersection of class and community (linguistic) in the context of the education market in Assam. Therefore, along with the education market, the politics of language in terms of community mobilisation also has to be probed.

1.4.2 Language market and its reproduction

The idea of a language market has to be understood in the context of the relationship between language and power. The politics of language is inherently and necessarily associated with the modern state and modern politics (Brass, 2004, p. 183). Bourdieu theorised about language and power in the context of France, wherein he argued that during the linguistic unification in the official state formation process, certain varieties of language emerged as the official languages. Such unification has happened not just in France but in various nations across the globe. The official language is bound with the state, both in its genesis and its social uses. It derives its legitimacy from its association with the state; and it becomes the norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45-46). These official languages are always in standardised forms and are a normalised product. Bourdieu visualised a unified language market which leads to a single unified linguistic community. Bourdieu also conceptualised language or linguistic utterances or expressions as forms of practice, and, as such, they must be understood as the product of the relation between a linguistic habitus and a linguistic market (ibid). Linguistic utterances are always produced in particular contexts or markets, and the properties of these markets endow linguistic products with a certain value.

The official language, although it derives its legitimacy from the state, does not find wide acceptance, simply due to government policies and state directives. The educational apparatus plays a crucial role in the process of construction, imposition and legitimation of languages (ibid, p. 49). Thus, education is deeply implicated in the politics of language. Also, according to him, it is the institution of education that has the monopoly in the large-scale production of producers and consumers of linguistic capital and therefore in the reproduction of the language market (ibid, p. 57). Furthermore, he argues

that the official language becomes normalised only when the labour market is completely integrated with the education market. The unification of the educational (linguistic) market and the unification of the labour market plays the most decisive role in devaluing dialects and establishing a new hierarchy of linguistic practices (ibid, p. 49).

Bourdieu's notion of the market when applied to language is not economic in the narrow sense. A language market is a field that is not economic in the narrow sense and practices might not be governed by a strictly economic logic (i.e. oriented towards monetary gain) but at the same time it has a logic that is economic in the broader sense, i.e. it is oriented towards gaining some kind of capital, be it cultural or symbolic, or towards maximisation of some profit like for example prestige (Thompson, 1991, p. 14-15).

Bourdieu (1991) in the context of France thus, conceptualised a unified linguistic market which when completely integrated with the education market and the labour market leads to a language becoming normalised. His theorisation is extremely useful but, in this theorisation, education is assumed to be the state's responsibility. As the previous section discussed, education is increasingly ceasing to be the state's responsibility. Also, the notion of a unified linguistic market is not seen in most parts of the world. Even within European linguistic nation-states, such unification is not seen as in the case of Spain (Woolard, 1985 as cited in LaDousa, 2005). In Asian contexts, like in India, instead of a unified market, there is the presence of disparate and often competing markets (LaDousa, 2005; Brass, 2004). In India, there are not one but multiple official languages. In the Indian context, Hindi, English and a number of languages have been recognised for school education. Indian education policies have likewise, been invested in the promotion of official languages at national and state levels creating a complex field of power relations at symbolic and material levels. Here, each of these official standard languages have its zone of influence. And many states are demarcated on linguistic lines. And often it is seen that even within these linguistic regional states of India, there is more than one official language, as in Assam where this study is located. Thus, the linguistic scenario is extremely complicated in India. There are no unified markets but rather competing ones. The fact that private players are providing education with the state no longer being the sole provider of education complicates this further. Bourdieu's conceptualisation

however, is useful in spite of the enormous complexity for the present study. One important conceptual tool to understand language politics is through the concept of language ideology, which emerged from Bourdieu's notion of the linguistic field.

1.4.3 Language Ideologies

In Bourdieu's work, language is viewed as capital, a symbolic capital, with some languages being more valued than others as they have more symbolic capital (Philips, 2004). Thus, language and inequality are related. Ideological aspects of language are also important when we talk about language, power and inequality. While there are several definitions of language ideology, the broadest definition is provided by Alan Rumsey who views language ideology as "shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world" (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 496). A more critical definition, provided by Joseph Errington, as "the situated, partial and interested character of conceptions and use of language" (ibid) is how the concept has been used in the present study. It is the political nature of the concept that is of importance. In the case of multilingual societies, language ideologies have shaped ideas about language and identity (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994). The equation of language and nation is a historical, ideological construct and this model has been exported through colonialism to become the dominant model around the world today (ibid, p. 60). This has implications for the formation of linguistic nationalism in Assam. Ideologies of language moreover, is a cluster or plural concept and consists of a number of converging dimensions, there are multiple language ideologies, they signify group or individual interests and awareness of these ideologies varies across speakers, they act as a mediating link between social structures and forms of talk and they link languages to group and personal identities (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 501). The important point to note, however, is that distinct ideas about language (broadly language ideologies) that shape much of the politics of language, emerge from discrete language markets or fields. Since there are no unified linguistic markets in India, there are multiple language ideologies operating. And since only the education system has the monopoly of reproducing the language market, the system is deeply implicated in this entire process. Moreover, in more concrete terms, educational

institutes, especially schools are important sites for the production and reproduction of language ideologies.

It is this interrelationship between language, education, market and politics that 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.

1.4.4 Markets as fields

Field theory comes from Pierre Bourdieu's tradition of sociology. Field is one of the key concepts in Bourdieu's theory of practice, along with habitus and capital. Field refers to the social space where interactions, transactions and events occur (Thomson, 2008, p. 67). It is the field that mediates what social agents do in specific social, economic and cultural contexts (ibid). Practice is the outcome of the dialectic between field and habitus, mediated by capital.

According to Bourdieu, the structure of the field can be understood in terms of distribution of capital, which can be of various kinds like financial capital, social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital (Thompson, 2008). In the economic field, individual actors employ their 'economic habitus' and the economic actors act in a 'reasonable' way and not in a 'rational way' by virtue of their habitus, which gives them a practical sense (ibid). The participation of actors in the field is because of their 'interest' (actors admit that the game is worth playing), and each field has its own interest, even if it appears as disinterestedness (ibid). Thus, for Bourdieu, actions (economic or otherwise) and interests have a fundamental link, but interests are not always narrowly economic (Bourdieu, 1991). Since interests are specific to the field concerned, they can be only determined through a careful empirical or historical inquiry into the distinctive properties of the fields concerned (ibid).

When it comes to the economic field, Bourdieu suggests that it is agents, or firms, defined by the volume and structure of the specific capital they possess, namely financial capital, cultural capital, technological capital, juridical capital and organisational capital, commercial capital, social capital and symbolic capital, that determine the structure of the

field, that is, the relation of force among the firms (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 195). In the economic field, the structure of the field weighs on the agents in the field and the dominant firm is the one that occupies a position in the structure such that the structure acts on its behalf and dominant firms define the regularities and sometimes the rules of the game (ibid). There is a tendency, Bourdieu asserts, for the structure to reproduce itself which is immanent in the very structure of the field (ibid, p.196). Thus, field theory is opposed to neoclassical economic theory which refuses to take structural effects or objective power relations into account and it is also opposed to the interactionist approach in which the economic and social order can be reduced to a host of interacting individuals, most often interacting on a contractual basis (ibid, p. 197). Bourdieu acknowledges the economic efficacy of networks that Granovetter (1985) uses in his approach of embeddedness but nonetheless is critical of this approach as it has a tendency to fall back into the interactionist vision, thus ignoring the structural constraint of the field (ibid, p. 198). Field theory thus suggests that the economic practices of the agents and the very potency of their networks depend, first and foremost, on the position these agents occupy in the economic fields (ibid).

Drawing heavily from Bourdieu's ideas, developing it further and applying it to markets, Neil Fligstein (2001) proposes a theory of 'markets as fields' where he suggests replacing profit-maximising actors (from classical economic theory) with people who are trying to promote the survival of their firms. In this theory, social action takes place in arenas or fields and these fields contain collective actors who try to produce a system of domination in that space and to do so requires the production of a local culture that defines social relations between actors (Fligstein, 2001, p.15). These local cultures contain cognitive elements (i.e., they are interpretive frameworks for actors), define social relationships, and help people interpret their own position in a set of social relationships (ibid). Collective actors who benefit the most from the current arrangements can be called incumbents, and those who benefit less can be called challengers. Once in place, the interactions in fields become 'games' where groups in the field who have more power use the acceptable cultural rules to reproduce their power. This process makes action in fields continuously conflictual and inherently political (ibid). Markets, according to this theory, are thought of as types of social orders that contain fields.

Since there are homologies between different social fields, the field of education also operates similarly. There are striking similarities when it comes to the patterned, regular and predictable practices within each field (Thompson, 2008). Field theory, which is a generic theory of social organisation, assumes that actors try to produce a 'local' stable world where the dominant actors produce meaning that allows them to reproduce their advantage. These actors create status hierarchies that define the position of incumbents and challengers (Fligstein, 2001, p. 29). A given market becomes a stable market (i.e., a field) when the product being exchanged has legitimacy with customers, and the suppliers of the good or service are able to produce a status hierarchy in which the largest suppliers dominate the market and are able to reproduce themselves on a period-to-period basis (ibid, p. 31). A stable 'market as field' means that the main players in a given market are able to reproduce their firms (ibid, p. 17). This theory suggests that social structures in markets and within firms emerge to help firms cope with competition and stabilise their various relationships (ibid). In markets, the goal of action is to ensure the survival of the firm (ibid, p. 71). The theory of fields implies that the search for stable interactions with competitors, suppliers and workers is the main cause of social structures in markets (ibid, p. 18). The theory of fields suggests that government as a set of fields interacts with markets as a set of fields (ibid, p. 19). As the forms of fields created by states to intervene in markets respond to and reshape the fields that are markets, state building and market building go hand in hand. Producing stability in multiple markets requires rules and therefore governments are deeply implicated in defining the various social structures that stabilise markets.

The theory also gives insights into what kind of social organisation is necessary for stable 'markets as fields' to exist. Markets are social arenas that exist for the production and sale of goods or services, and they are characterised by structured exchange. Structured exchange implies that actors expect repeated exchanges for their products and therefore, they need rules and social structures to guide and organise exchange (ibid, p. 31). Actors produce organisations to make the good (service) and create social relations between competitors to govern competition. Stable markets can be defined as 'self-reproducing structures' in which incumbent and challenger firms reproduce their positions on a period-to-period basis. The sellers generally produce the social structure in the market

because their firms' existence is at stake if a stable market does not appear. The social relations between the sellers in a stable market are such that one set of firms produces the dominant cultural meanings for the market and the other firms fall in line. Sellers vie for customers and customers may switch suppliers. The stability of the sellers, in the sense of their organisational survival, is what is important to the stability of the market. A market is a situation in which the status hierarchy, and by implication, the existence of the leading sellers is reproduced on a period-to-period basis (ibid, p. 31).

This theory is useful in explaining how new markets are created, how they attain stability and how they are transformed. And it is particularly useful when analysing societies that are transitioning from socialism to a market-based economy. In the theory of fields, a stable market is defined as a situation in which the identities and status hierarchy of producer firms (i.e., who are the incumbents and the challengers) is well known and it is politics that reproduce the position of the advantaged groups (ibid, p. 76). In the case of the emergence of new markets, however, the politics resemble social movements and the most fluid period in a market is during its emergence. The roles of challengers and incumbents are yet to be defined, and there is no accepted set of social relations (ibid). New markets are born in close proximity to existing markets (ibid, p. 78). The theory suggests that transformation of existing markets results from exogenous forces: invasion, economic crisis, or political intervention by states (ibid, p. 84) and legitimacy is bestowed on markets by states.

Fligstein's use of the notion of 'field' is extremely useful when applied to the education market. With this conceptual understanding of the field, the present study aims to examine the contradiction between the language market and the education market in Assam. But before that, some comments on some basic concepts used in the study.

1.4.5 Basic concepts used – *Jati* and Class

Along with main concepts of habitus, capital, field, market, language ideology etc, a couple of more concepts need some clarification.

Jati **-** The schools under study are called *Jatiya Bidyalays.* Here, *Bidyalay* equals school. The term *Jatiya* needs some clarification. The term *Jati* is widely used in the Indian sub-

continent. In mainstream India, the term generally denotes caste, but not necessarily confined to it. It means caste in the popular usage. However, in Assam, in the Assamese language, in popular usage it generally means nationality. *Jati* refers to nationality. One might also say that it refers to community but it mostly refers to politically conscious community, i.e. a nationality. Community, in the general sense, has another word, both in Hindi as well as in Assamese and that is *sampraday.* Therefore, *jati* is not *sampraday. Jati* is nationality in Assamese. The term *Jatiya* therefore refers to nationalist or nationalistic. There are many such terms that are used in Assam. For example, *jatiya nayak* (national hero), *jatiya pita* (national father), *jatiya khayda* (national food) *jatiya poshak* (national cloth), *jatiya pataka* (national flag), *jatiya sangeet* (national song) and so on. The term has resonance in Assam. There is also a political party by the name of *Assam Jatiya Parishad*. *Jatiya Bidyalay* therefore, literally means 'nationalist schools'. Since nationalism is talked about only in the context of sovereign nation-states, while discussing Assamese nationalism, in the English language, sub-nationalism[1] has been used by some scholars (Baruah, 1999). However, while discussing the nationalism in the Assamese language, no prefix is added (ibid). It is referred to as *jatiyatabaad* (nationalism, not sub-nationalism) while Indian nationalism in Hindi is referred to as *rashtravaad* (nationalism).

The concept, therefore, of vital importance for the present study is that of the community. I use community both to signify the politically conscious community, that is nationality as well as in the general sense, like the neighbourhood community or school community. The concept of community has the dynamism that it can be used with multiple other variables like language, religion, caste and so on. Community here refers to the informally organised group that is conscious of its group membership and that also has a locality. The main features are informal organisation as well as consciousness.

***Class* -** Although class is a useful concept, unfortunately, in India most people are likely to define themselves as middle-class even if objectively (in terms of a criteria like income) they might not be so. Class, when used in the objective sense, in terms of some

[1] Sub-nationalism refers to tendency of a group to assert one's identity primarily with the region within a country which may or may not have an easy relationship with the imagination of the pan-national elements (Baruah, 1999)

criteria (say income or property) remains a theoretical class and not a real class. Only when we take the subjective aspects of class (like a class 'for' itself), the concept has some potency. Also, Indians do not act as if they belong to particular classes. The use of the term, therefore, is problematic in the Indian context. Even if one goes by the argument, in the lines of Bourdieu, that individuals don't always act consciously and it is by virtue of their *habituses* that they have a practical sense and act accordingly as per the contexts, there is nothing that class can explain that status (social position) can't. I, therefore use class only in terms of the social positions. I use class in line with Bourdieu's notion of class in terms of social positions and the corresponding capitals they possess (Thompson, 1991, p. 30). This is essentially Weberian, i.e. in terms of market position and in terms of possession of wealth and property. The present study mostly concerns with those of the middle, especially lower middle classes and its intersections with the community.

1.5 Literature Review

For the present study, some selected literature on private schools, education market, language markets and school choice has been reviewed. 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, p. 61).

1.5.1 Public vs Private schools – the debate

One of the raging debates in current times is on the market model of education. Should education be provided by the state or should there be private provisions? Stephen Ball (1993) provides some background on this debate in 'Education Markets, Choice and Social Class: the market as a class strategy in the UK and the USA'. He reviews the case against public education which is considered a monopoly. The arguments against this type of monopoly public education are that in these schools, decision making is dominated by self-interest, school managers have self-serving and minimalist survival strategies due to the lack of profit or loss motives, finances are not directly linked to satisfaction of clients, this type of schooling leads to an inefficient bureaucracy that encourages waste and hinders responsiveness to parental concerns leading to depress

standards. On top of that, due to the sameness of these schools, they remove the possibility of choice for parents and the possibility of ensuring that the child's needs are met. Additionally, the democratic control of monopoly schools involves imposition of the policies of the dominant interest groups on the community as a whole and within this system, parents and students are not well enough organised to be powerful (Ball, 1993, p. 4). Ball says that Chubb and Moe (1990) have provided some arguments for the market model of education. Chubb and Moe (1990) claim that private schools provide a mechanism for natural selection through which unpopular schools are bound to be forced to either improve or shut down, the school owners have a strong incentive to please parents and students thereby making schools responsive and finally that switching between schools will lead to movement of students from unpopular or unresponsive schools to the popular and responsive ones (ibid, p. 5).

John Witte (2000) in *The Market Approach to Education: an analysis of America's first voucher program* also discusses the debate in the context of America's first voucher program – the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Witte argues that most debates over educational choice, whether it is theoretical or policy-oriented occurs at a very abstract level (Witte, 2000, p. 11). Those who support choice focus on the failings of the public system and they praise competition and claim that competition amongst schools will lead to better schools. On the other hand, others argue that choice will spell the destruction of public education and will lead to resegregation of schools by race, class and ability (ibid, p. 5). Witte also highlights the normative dimensions of the debate that those who favour choice always focus on freedom, often positing freedom as an expression of equal opportunity while those who oppose choice stress the other dimensions of equality – equality of inputs and equality of results (ibid, p, 18).

In *Education and the Market Place*, edited by David Bridges and Terence McLaughlin (1994), Gerald Grace in 'Education is a Public Good: On the need to Resist the Domination of Economic Science' Colin Wringe in 'Markets, Values and Education' and John White in 'Education and the Limits of the market' put forward arguments against market-based education such as education is a public good and not a private good and so on (Grace, 1994, p. 125; Wringe, 1994, p. 105; White, 1994, p. 117). On the other hand,

James Tooley in ‘In Defence of Markets in Educational Provision’ turns the argument on the head and instead questions if states were not involved in education except in minimal ways in the past and if state schooling has not been found to be satisfactory then what is the wisdom in allowing states in education (Tooley, 1994, p. 149). Tooley puts forward a very strong case for private schooling.

In the Indian context as well, this debate is a recurring one. Tooley et al (2007) in ‘Private schools and the millennium development goal of universal primary education: a census and comparative survey in Hyderabad, India’ argue that the private sector in education is a significant provider for the poor. They argue along the lines that private schools in Hyderabad, catering to the poor, provide a better quality of education as compared to government schools. In *The Beautiful Tree,* Tooley (2009) highlights the importance of private schools and their catering to the needs of the public, especially the poor, not just in India but in numerous other countries. He argues for the case of private schools quite strongly and that children in private schools outperform those in public schools. Sarangapani and Winch (2010) in ‘Tooley, Dixon and Gomathi on private education in Hyderabad: a reply’ put forward certain counter-arguments that there are flaws in their case and remain unproven. While the debate continues, both internationally and nationally, numerous studies have been conducted on private schools over the years.

1.5.2 Schools, choice, class and medium of instruction

Stephen Ball (2003) in *Class Strategies and the Education market* argues that the middle classes improve their social advancement and mobility through the education market, and he delves into the intricate mechanisms and strategies as to how the market model of education benefits them. By making class the central focus of his work, Ball examines ‘choice’ within the complex field of the relations of education and operationalised as middle-class advantage within a social order framed by market principles and understood in terms of market relations. While an education market might confer class advantage to the middle classes, things are quite different for the working classes. Reay and Ball (1997) in ‘Spoilt for Choice: the working classes and educational markets’ argue that for working class parents, choice is very different from middle class choice making. They argue that working-class parents, unlike the middle-class parents are less likely to see

themselves as sort of consumers of education (Reay and Ball, 1997, p. 91). For them, educational choices are as much about avoiding anxiety, failure and rejection as they are about picking a good school for their kids, thus characterised by ambivalence (ibid, p. 93). Social class, therefore, remains a potent differentiating category in the analysis of home-school relations and choice is a device through which class differences are turned into educational inequality.

In the Indian context Geetha Nambissan (2010) in 'The Indian middle classes and educational advantage: family strategies and practices' argues that the participation of the upper sections of the middle classes in the education system has been from a position of social and economic privilege that has allowed them to shape the system and define what 'good education' is, as well as the desirable cultural resources for success. She highlights the importance of English medium education while discussing middle class aspirations and argues that the exclusive English medium private schools have always ensured high social status to the elite in India. Nambissan (2012) in 'Private Schools for the Poor: Business as Usual' also brings to notice the booming business of private schools for the poor in India and its linkages with English education. Poor parents, she argues often equate English medium schooling with good education which is exploited by the private players. Sarangapani (2018) in 'Hyderabad's Education Market' examines Hyderabad's education market and in her study finds that the majority of the private schools, be it recognised or unrecognised are in English medium. Thus, she finds that in Hyderabad, English medium is the default option, and education in other languages like Telegu and Urdu is severely limited. Gurney (2018) in 'School Quality: Parent perspectives and schooling choices' in her work in Delhi highlights parents' choices and their focus on English medium education for their children and suggests that it could be understood as a strategic decision in view of the potential for relative financial gains. She also points out that most of the private schools in each area advertised themselves as 'English medium' explicitly.

While most of the works focus on class and English medium education in the context of private schools, there are limited studies that bring to light the complexity of the equation between language and education. Veronique Benei (2005) in 'Of Languages, Passions

and Interests: Education, Regionalism and Globalisation in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, 1800-2000', looks at the regional politics, the linguistic dimension and its role in education at the state level. She says that while it is true that English medium schools have been increasing in Maharashtra, she cautions that the view that Indian middle classes are opting for English medium instruction *en masse* as an opportunity for gaining socio-economic advantage, needs qualification. She says that evidence from Maharashtra shows that while making educational decisions, there is often a tension between socio-economic interests and identity. While most studies, like the ones described earlier, have sought to base the decision-making processes of the middle or the lower classes on the lines of rational choice theory, she, on the other hand, tries to show how languages are fundamental vehicles of identity and often there is deep-seated attachment that comes in conflict with economic interests. She further claims that empirical evidence suggests that there is still widespread reluctance among a section of Marathi-speaking people to send their children to English medium institutions despite the awareness of the potential for economic mobility promised by English education. She, therefore, calls for a reappraisal of the allegedly popular craze for English medium instruction as the Marathi speakers belonging to the main Maharashtrian communities have not opted for such instruction.

Benei says that the issues of language and education are complex in Maharashtra. For those for whom Marathi is a defining element of their identity, it is far more difficult than other groups for whom socio-religious identity is more significant. For minority communities, language is not specifically associated with a sense of belonging to a particular community and the choice of medium of instruction is dependent on other factors like enabling communication in business situations, especially among merchant families. However, she makes the case that there is no evidence that English medium instruction, at least at the primary level, is gaining ground at the cost of the vernacular. In fact, vernacular education has expanded at the same or even higher rate. So, although some parents are opting for English-medium instruction, the same is true for private Marathi-medium education.

Benei' work shows how linguistic nationalism can affect school choices. This gives a glimpse of the complexity of the relationship between education and language in the

country by highlighting the existence of multiple markets. There are not many works on similar lines in India. Chaise LaDousa's (2014) *Hindi is Our Ground, English is Our Sky: Education, Language and Social Class in Contemporary India,* where he did a detailed study on schools in Banaras in northern India reveals the dynamics of multiple language markets. Using the notion of language ideology, he emphasises the importance of the medium of instruction, be it English or Hindi, when it comes to school distinctions. He argues along the lines that the emergence of diverse ideologies of Hindi and English is facilitated by the heterogenous composition of the new middle class. He suggests that in Banaras, the medium of the school exhibits different indexical possibilities depending on the framing, with Hindi-medium schools indexing the nation and English-medium schools indexing the transcendence of national boundaries. He also draws attention to the fact that in Banaras, when people reflect on schools in terms of fees, the cheaper schools were assumed to be run by the state and in Hindi medium while the expensive ones were assumed to be private and English medium despite the existence of private Hindi medium schools that charge high fees and English medium schools that charge comparable fees to their Hindi medium counterparts. He suggests that it is the process of semiotic erasure that results in such assumptions where ideology renders some aspects invisible. LaDousa's work is also significant as it highlights how private schools advertise and promote themselves. This is relevant to understanding the supply side of the education market which has remained large under-theorised.

LaDousa's study remains a pioneering work. Nirmali Goswami's (2017) *Legimitising Standard Languages: Perspectives from a School in Banaras* highlights the legitimacy processes that construct language ideologies within a vernacular language market. She focuses on Hindi and draws attention to the fact that the dominant standard languages operating within a region enjoy prestige and there are power dynamics associated with them. In her case, she discusses the processes that underline the legitimation of Hindi in schools. She also shows the importance of the labour market in language use and argues that for some communities, the language use patterns are influenced by their current occupational associations. By focusing on the power dynamics of a regional standard language, her work problematises the linear processes of aspirations of socio-economic mobility as portrayed by some studies.

However, it must be noted that these studies were conducted in north India where, although language politics is significant, it is religion that holds primacy over language. In other parts of India where language sentiments override religious ones, except Benei's work, there are not many studies available. Bhuyan and Goswami's (2021) 'Of Sanskrit and Saraswati: The Interplay of the Regional and the National Symbols in a School in Assam' is an important study. Here, the authors analyse an Assamese medium private school, affiliated with the Vidya Bharti Trust, as a site where there is a complex interplay of the national and the regional symbols. The authors try to show how such a school has a distinct regional flavour and draw attention to the processes of how regional symbols get incorporated into the larger national imaginary. They also show the vernacular face of Sanskrit in the school, for example the Sanskrit verses are written in the Assamese script in the prayer book and so on.

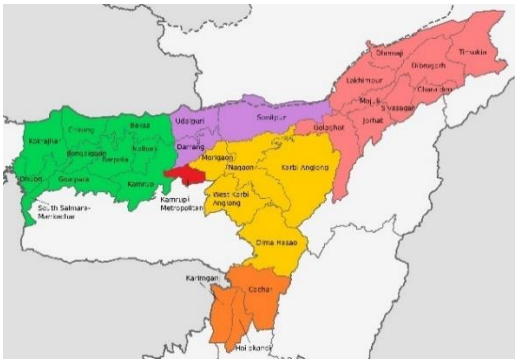
I draw from the above-cited works and try to apply them to the context of Assam and to a specific set of schools called the *Jatiya Bidyalays* that operate completely under market logic. It must be noted that while we discuss private schools, very less attention has been paid to the market model of education on the supply side (Ball, 1993; Witte, 2000). I, therefore, try to probe how private schools that function in a regional medium of instruction, operate under competitive market conditions in Assam.

1.6 The field – Guwahati city in Kamrup (Metropolitan) district, Assam

The map below (Map 1) shows the linguistic map of India. The respective colours show the field of influence of the official languages. Although this is highly simplified map, the respective colours show the zone of influence of the official languages and the language markets. But they are not unified in any sense. Even within their respective zones there are considerable overlaps.

The study is located in Guwahati, Assam which is the largest city in the entire north-eastern region of India. The city lies in the district of Kamrup (Metropolitan) (highlighted in red on the map on the right, map 2) and is of strategic importance, is considered the gateway to the north-eastern region and also potentially the gateway to South-East Asia. The current population projected (for 2024) is slightly more than a quarter and a million. According to the 2011 census, the population of the city was slightly less than ten lakhs

(1 million) at 957, 352 with average literacy of 91.47%. The city has a long antiquity and has been an important settlement area for at least the last two millennia. Formerly known as *Pragjyotishpura* (city of Eastern Astrology) (Gait, 2017), it was the capital of many kingdoms in the distant past notably the *Varman* dynasty (4^{th}-7^{th} century of the common era), *Pala* dynasty (10^{th}-12^{th} century of the common era). During the Middle-ages as well, it was an important site as it served as the western administrative headquarters of the *Ahom* kingdom, from the late 16^{th} and 17^{th} century onwards (ibid). Since it was the centre for the occult sciences, namely astrology in the distant past, one can speculate that it must have been an important centre for learning as well.



Maps 1 and 2: Map 1 (on the left) shows the important linguistic regions of India. Source: openverse.org. Credits: by Filpro, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. Map 2 (right) shows the map of Assam and Kamrup (Metro) **(Red)** district of which Guwahati forms a major part. Source: openverse.org. Credits: Milenioscurio, licensed under CC BY- SA 4.0

The city is also an important religious site, home to numerous temples, the most famous of them being the Kamakhya Temple, and therefore often referred to as the city of temples. The *Kalika Puran*, the religious text, believed to be composed around the 10^{th} century, composed in Sanskrit and considered among the oldest among the literature to have emerged from the region is dedicated to the goddess Kamakhya. Although it can never be ascertained for sure as to where was this text composed and whether it was

really composed in *Pragjyotishpur* (modern Guwahati) itself, but given the importance of the place as a capital, for the occult sciences and for religious worship it can be speculated that Guwahati indeed has a long history of education. And when the colonial rule started in 1826, it became even more important as an educational hub and administrative centre.

The first English medium school set up by the British was in Guwahati in 1835 (Barpujari, 2007), the first, (although technically second[2]) college in the province of Assam was Cotton College, now a University, was set up in 1901, the first university of the state after India's independence was established here – Guwahati University in 1948. During colonial times, it was the centre for politics and many of the emerging middle class were either born or settled here. It continued to be an important centre during colonial times even though for strategic reasons Shillong was made the capital of the province of Assam in 1874 and continued to be so till 1972. The city became the capital of Assam in 1972 after Meghalaya became a separate state in 1971. The city was the epicentre of many movements, even the recent anti Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) movement in the year 2019-20. The first Vidya Bharti school was set up in 1979. It was at the centre of the medium of instruction movement in 1972 and it was here that the first *Jatiya Bidyalay* was set up in 1994. The city has seen rapid expansion once it became the capital in 1972 and this expansion has accelerated from the 2000s onwards. At present, being the biggest urban centre in the entire region, it attracts students from all corners of the state and also the nearby states. There are a number of government and privately funded Universities, an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), a medical college, a wide range of colleges, both government and private, and a large number of schools, both government and private. Within private schools, there's a wide spectrum of such schools, ranging from international schools that follow an international syllabus, other elite schools that have a pan Indian network like for example Delhi Public School, convent schools like Don Bosco or Saint Marys, and also numerous low fee schools. Amongst private schools, there are many that are regionally oriented and provide education in

[2] Murari Chand College in Sylhet that was established in 1892, was technically the first college to be set up in the province of Assam during colonial times. But with Sylhet separated from Assam and merged with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at the dawn of independence, Cotton College can be called the first college in Assam.

Assamese or other regional languages. Due to its importance as a centre for education, language politics and administrative centre, Guwahati proves to be an important setting to explore the diversified nature of private schools.

The city has a mixed population with diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious communities living side by side. The city has a long history of migration. In pre-colonial times various tribes and castes made it their home. During colonial times, many Bengali speaking Hindus migrated here for bureaucratic jobs. Bengali speaking Muslims, those that migrated at the dawn of the 20th century and after independence are also present in considerable numbers. Bengali speakers constitute the second largest group after Assamese speakers. Some Hindi speaking individuals, especially Marwaris from the Hindi belt also came here for trade and commerce which they were able to monopolise. Other Hindi speakers have also migrated here, especially those from Bihar, especially after independence, those who are involved in lower-level jobs. As such, there's a sizeable Hindi speaking population in the city. Numerous tribes, not just from the state but also migrants from other north-eastern states live here. This is reflected in the names of several localities like Manipuri *basti*, Christian *basti* etc. The tables below show the population distribution in terms of language and religion.

Language	Population	Percentage
Assamese	556258	57.8
Bengali	196570	20.42
Hindi	137508	14.28
Nepali	18483	1.92
Bodo	16227	1.68
Manipuri	8733	0.9
All others	28555	2.96
Total	962334	100

Table 1.1 shows the population distribution in Guwahati City in terms of language. Source: Language census 2011

In the above table (Table 1.1), the Assamese speaking population comprises of both Hindus and Muslims. Many formerly Bengali speaking Muslims identify themselves as Assamese. They are sometimes referred to as *Na-Asamiya* (neo-Assamese). The table (Table 1.2) below shows the distribution in terms of religion.

Religion	Population	Percentage
Hindu	815449	84.74
Muslim	119825	12.45
Christian	8913	0.93
Sikh	3449	0.36
Jain	9193	0.96
Others	147	0.02
Not stated	3813	0.4
Total	962334	100

Table 1.2: Population distribution of Guwahati City in terms of religion. Source: Census 2011

The city's economy is a mixed one with no one sector predominating as such. There are some manufacturing units but it is not an industrial city. Major industries are tea, silk and handloom (India smart city profile). It has one of the busiest tea auction centres in the world. There's also an oil refinery. The primary commodities manufactured are bakery products, cane products and carbon (ibid).

Sector	Male	Female	Total (%)
Manufacturing	2.8	4.2	3.1
Construction	20.5	14.6	19.5
Wholesale trade	1.4	0	1.2
Petty trade	23.9	10.4	21.7
Waste collection	11.2	13.5	11.5
Transport	18.3	3.1	15.8
Hotel & Restaurant	1.4	7.3	2.4
ICT + Finance + Real Estate	2.6	5.2	3.1
Public admin + Social Service	5.7	11.5	6.6
Personal Services	6.3	25	9.3
Others (unspecified)	5.7	5.2	5.6
Total	100	100	100

Table 1.3: Percentage of population employed across different sectors in Guwahati for 2011. Source: Desai et al (2014).

Desai et al (2014) gives an idea about the distribution of the population across different employment sectors (Table 1.3). Corporate jobs are few although it has been increasing

lately. Government jobs, be in administration or public sector enterprises are considered the most prestigious. The city's massive expansion after the 2000s has, however, led to a boom in the hospitality industry. It has been selected as part of the smart city project. Construction is also a big sector. One sees app-based taxi services and app-based food delivery boys everywhere in the city. These are also important sources of employment for many youths, many of whom have migrated from smaller cities. In terms of occupation categories, the India smart city profile has the following data in terms of percentages which have been taken from National Sample Survey Office (NSSO 68th round, 2011-2012. (Table 1.4).

Workers classified by major occupation (%)	%
Legislators, senior officials and managers	0.85
Professionals	14.63
Technicians and associate professionals	4.51
Clerks	4.05
Service workers and shop and market sales workers	18.81
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	6.22
Craft and related trades workers	28.29
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	3.13
Elementary occupations	15.37
Workers not classified by occupation	4.14
Total	100

Table 1.4: Population distribution across different occupational category for 2011-12. Source: India Smart City Profile

While these tables give us a rough idea about the composition of the city's population, the important question is what kind of schools are students attending. The UDISE+ data allows to have a very clear picture. The data presented below is for the district of Kamrup (Metro) which is synonymous with Guwahati city but the district encompasses some adjoining areas as well. But it is a good enough representation. The data was manually compiled from UDISE+ reports for the year 2018-19. In Kamrup (M), there are a total of 1123 schools with a total enrolment of 264005. Out of these 1123 schools, Department of education runs 662 schools, private unaided schools are 293, central schools are 7 and

rest are 161. The number and enrolment of each type of school are shown in the table below (Table 1.5).

As can be seen, almost half of the population is enrolled in private unaided schools that are recognised.

School management	No of schools	Total enrolment
Dept of education	662	106053
Pvt Unaided (rec)	293	129050
Central School	7	11233
Others	161	17669
Total	1123	264005

Table 1.5: No of schools and enrolment in terms of management. Source: UDISE+ reports. Compiled manually.

The other schools including government aided as well as unrecognised private schools are clubbed with others for simplicity. Since the study is concerned with private schools, it is helpful to look at the figures of these private schools in terms of the medium of instruction.

Medium	No of schools	Enrolment	Avg enrolment
As	92	26832	291.6
Eng	191	100445	525.8
Oth	10	1773	177.3
Total	293	129050	

Table 1.6: Private unaided schools in Kamrup (M) in terms of medium of instruction. Source: UDISE+ reports.

As seen from the above table (Table 1.6), the data clearly shows that the majority enrolment, more than three-fourth are in English medium schools. These schools are also more than two-thirds of all the schools in the city. Assamese schools are about one-third of the schools but their enrolment is only about twenty percent of all enrolment. The average enrolment of each school also shows that these schools are relatively small schools. But at the same time, more than 90 schools are also not a small number. As we shall see in Chapter 3, the number of private schools in Assamese medium as well as their enrolment in the whole of Assam is in fact more than those of English medium. But

yes, there is a rural-urban contradiction. Guwahati, the urban centre sees a strong demand for English schooling. The linguistic profile as well as the school data reveals the existence of multiple school as well language markets in the city.

1.7 Research Methodology

I wanted to examine the contradictions between the language market and the school market in Assam. To understand the interplay of school education with the language 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 functioning of one such school located in Kamrup Metropolitan area. The study is located in Guwahati, which is the administrative centre of the state of Assam and is an important site to examine the expansion of school education and language politics in the region. Also, the *Jatiya Bidyalay* (JB) movement originated here and the first school was established here in 1994. The city has a number of JBs that allow 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 by conversations, interviews and group discussions over a period of six months. 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, 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 was done to get an idea of the schools. Since the 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 was 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.

I conducted my fieldwork in a school that was located in one of the Municipality wards. The field location is not at the heart of the city but towards the Assam-Meghalaya border. Although it comes under the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC)'s jurisdiction, this part of the city was developed much later. The population is a mixed one with Assamese Hindus and Bengali Hindus in large numbers with a sizeable population of many tribes and communities like Boro, Garo, etc., Biharis, Assamese Muslims, Bengali Muslims etc. In that locality (within 2-3 km radius), there are different kinds of schools, a few government schools (Assamese medium), one government school for blind students, 4-5 private English medium schools and three *Jatiya Bidyalays*. In total, there are more than 30 active schools listed as per the UDISE database in that zip code.

The small school where I did my study is named KGFZ *Jatiya Bidyalay*. It is also an old JB, established in 2000-01. This school caters to mostly lower middle class and poorer classes of students. At the time of fieldwork, there were around roughly 150 students and 15 teachers. The school is a low-fee budget school with monthly fees ranging from Rs. 350-1500, from pre-nursery to 10th grade. Majority of the students were Assamese Hindus but there were also some Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims, Nepalis, Bodos etc. My insights about the functioning of the low fee private schools and their inner dynamics are based on participant observation method. I worked in the school

as one of the substitute teachers for this duration. The classroom interactions with students, staff room interactions with teachers, my own observations in the school, conversations with parents, the gossips 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 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 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 was studying such small schools and that I would write about it. Although no one was bothered by the fact that I was studying and would be writing about them, I followed the principles of confidentiality and privacy.

During my stay, I got to know the teachers and the students and eventually remembered most of the students' names by heart. I am good friends with some of the teachers there while with the rest I have a more formal relationship. Sometimes after school, my friend (one of the teachers in the school) and I would stay back and chat about the school in the nearby shop where we often had lunch and tea. He would give me a lot of information about the school, including confidential ones. At the time of my joining there was a teacher crisis in the school and the school was short on teachers. The school was just recovering from the Covid shock. Teachers used to come and go. My presence, therefore in a way may have benefited the school in some manner, not only in taking classes for

absentee teachers but also in maintaining the perception that ‘teachers are present in class’. I don’t mean to exaggerate my role here and I acknowledge the fact that I equally benefited from the school. But this is a very important point. In a competitive market where many private schools compete to gain students, perception about the school is of paramount importance. The main parameter is of course academic results, but equally important is whether classes take place regularly and whether teachers are present in class. This is because the reference point is taken as the government school where there is a perception that no classes take place. Students generally go home and tell their parents about their day in school. When teachers are not present in class, parents get to know and eventually the word gets out in the locality. Also, what goes on inside the school, whether any teaching actually takes place is less important than whether teachers are actually present in the classroom. As they say ‘tahator to teacher ae nai’ (they have no teachers). My presence therefore was useful for the school. However, this is a methodological limitation of the study, as with any ethnographic study. The reality that I was trying to observe was affected, slightly or even considerably, by my very presence.

Another major limitation of the study was the status conflict I faced, being both a teacher and a researcher at the same time. I was not just a researcher doing field study in the school but I was also a teacher who was responsible for the students. So, I naturally had some attachment with the students. When one teaches in a school for a few months, one starts caring about the school and wishes it well. During my stay in the school, I was part of many teacher meetings, staff meetings, parent-guardian meetings where I was a teacher first and a researcher second. For many parents whose kids were not performing well in studies and also were not attentive in class and were from poorer backgrounds, I had to give practical advice, carefully maintaining a balance between my role as a teacher and a researcher. The ethical dilemmas were more in force when some parents said ‘mari pithi phali dibo kintu yak thik kori dibo’ (beat him black and blue but make him a good student). I had to constantly deal with such ethical dilemmas. It was not easy negotiating such situations.

Other limitations include not being able to take notes during the day while I was at school. I did keep a field diary but it was rather difficult to take field notes during the day

when I was in the school as other teachers, students etc used to get curious as to what I was writing. So, I could write my notes only after I got home. So, every day, from Monday to Saturday, six days a week. I would go to the school and spend the day from 8:45 am in the morning when the morning assembly starts to 2:00 pm when the classes end. Whatever I observed, whatever conversations I had during the day, I would carefully try to recollect and note it down after I got home. I am aware of the possibility of human error through memory distortion, both at source and content, but there was no way I could take detailed notes inside the school.

The other major challenge was that as I continued my work there, I found myself burdened with official work of the school and my responsibilities increased over time. I was given charge of English classes for grades 8, 9 and 10. That meant taking full ownership of the curriculum. While this was alright and was not too difficult, but as a teacher I was also supposed to give them detailed notes for the English texts and poems. As students of an Assamese medium school, the students were not too comfortable with the English language and needed extra guidance which I was expected to give. Therefore, during the later months along with the classes I also had to sit at home and prepare notes for them. The real challenge, however, was to get out of the school as I was approaching the end of my fieldwork. The owner of the school wanted me to stay and continue to be a full-time English teacher in the school. He offered the job more than once but I politely declined. Eventually, in the month of September when I joined as a part-time teacher in a state university, I officially ended my fieldwork in the school.

Linguistically I faced some challenges, but very minor ones. I was researching a private school where the medium of instruction was Assamese while I myself had studied in an English medium school. Since Assamese is my first/home language it was easy to interact with students but when it came to teaching students (during the proxy classes), it was at times difficult, especially for Science and Mathematics. I had studied these subjects in English and I was unaware of many of the technical terms used in Assamese. It’s not like I couldn’t do school level mathematics or teach them school level science, it was the vocabulary that was a hindrance. So, for those classes, I generally gave them some problems to solve (for Maths) and made them read the text (for Science). For the rest of

the subjects, it was much easier. However, I was aware of my limitation that I can't write correct spellings for Assamese words (in the local script). So, I tried to carefully avoid writing on the blackboard and instead focused on explaining the content of the text (students are smart and I could have been an object of ridicule for them if I made spelling mistakes publicly). From Social Science to Assamese, from Hindi to English and from Science to Mathematics, I taught the students (from standard 3 to standard 10), some as a dedicated teacher and others as a proxy teacher.

Guwahati is in lower Assam and most of the teachers as well students speak a language variety called *Kamrupi* (considered a dialect of Assamese). Some female teachers who have roots in upper Assam did speak a more standard formal kind of Assamese but overall *Kamrupi* was more in use inside the school, at least on informal occasions. For formal occasions like the morning Assembly, inside classrooms or speech by faculty, it was more censored and made closer to the standard. I myself am not very well-versed in *Kamrupi* and am unfamiliar with the vocabulary. When I took classes I used a more standardised formal Assamese (the one I am naturally familiar with) but with some of the teachers I spoke to, or attempted to (by means of imitation) speak in *Kamrupi*. I believe that helped in building camaraderie with some of them and one of them is a close friend now. The language issue is a sensitive one all over Assam and in areas of lower Assam, *Kamrupi* sentiments are quite strong. Students mostly spoke in standard Assamese with teachers but amongst themselves, they spoke more casually, in a tongue closer to the local version (*Kamrupi* i.e.). I would once in a while indulge in some talk with students in *Kamrupi* but it was rare. It was important for me to maintain some distance with the students and language was one way of doing it. By using a more formal language I kept things more professional with the students. With parents as well when I spoke to them, it was in a more formal standard language.

When initially I picked a sociological problem (the present study), my values affected it considerably. As an ethnic Assamese, who has some sentiments for the language I was curious to know more about these schools since these schools were meant for safeguarding mother-tongue education. The fact that one of my near relatives had also opened one such *Jatiya Bidyalay* in the year 2000 probably played a part in selecting the

problem. During the course of the fieldwork, probably in my heart, I wanted to see these schools succeed. I was, however, aware of my biases, and was conscious enough to make sure that I portray the school with honesty. During my younger years and even into my doctoral program, I had particular ideas about language. I had internalised notions of language and had some sentiments for 'my' language. But critical readings in colonial literature made me realise the ideological constructions of languages that are at work. I realised that ideas of language as an identity marker, language as a property of a group, the notion of mother-tongue etc., all these notions that are so sentimental in the part of the world that I am in, are deeply ideological constructs that are of very recent origin, barely a few hundred years old. How does one unlearn all of that? It is extremely challenging. My perceptions about language have changed over the years, owing to the academic readings. Despite that, I still like to argue in favour of language, not because it is a marker of group identity but because every language encodes in itself a worldview. Language is a vehicle of thought, we think in words, comprehend the world in concepts, which themselves are in the words that belong to particular languages. Each language therefore has a distinct feel for the world, it is a lens to look at the world. The survival of a language ensures the survival of this worldview. It is with this mind that I still have some sentiments for Assamese, 'my' language and that meant wishing these schools would succeed in the long run.

In the school, my own ideas about language also might have affected the way students perceive languages. My presence as a researcher in the field setting (i.e., the school) and my role as a teacher came in conflict with each other at times. Amongst many other things, I was trying to look at language ideologies and how students perceive languages but my own ideas about language might also have affected their perceptions as well. As a researcher, I wanted to study their ideas and perceptions about languages but as a teacher, it was also my duty and responsibility (as I thought) to teach them how to make the best use of languages which might eventually help them in social mobility later on. I personally don't like to think of language as a kind of private property of a group which is a distinct modern European idea; instead, I like to think of language more as a resource or capital that can be instrumental in bettering one's life chances. I often told students about the practical uses of languages, particularly Hindi and English when I took classes.

But I tried not to go overboard because I was constantly aware that I was first and foremost a researcher and second a teacher and not the other way round. But even then, it might have affected their own ideas about languages, at least to some extent.

I believe the present study can contribute to the existing body of work on private schools. That private schools now occupy an important place in the educational landscape of the country is well acknowledged in academic circles. There are numerous studies that look at the dynamics of private schools, be it the elite high-end schools or the low-cost schools. The diversified and differentiated nature of these schools is getting a lot of attention (Vasavi, 2022). But even then, many commentators seem to assume that most of the private schools are in English medium. That private schools are functioning or even flourishing in other regional Indian languages has not received the academic attention it deserves. The question of language and the sentiments associated with it and how that might affect schooling choices have remained neglected. This study brings to light the salience of language, and the question of medium in the context of private schooling. In social sciences, 'there has been surprisingly little scholarship on medium' (LaDousa, 2022). The study aims to contribute to the existing body of scholarship on the diversified nature of private schools in India. This would throw light on how the market responds to different local contexts and often appropriates it to its advantage.

1.8 Organisation of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the research problem, the research objectives as well as the theoretical and methodological orientation of the study.

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. The politics of languages in the region that influenced the development of the education system during this time is analysed. 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 Niketan*s 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 Bidyalay* 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 Bidyalays* (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 achievements are revealed in this chapter.

The sixth chapter explores the parental choices by examining the various factors that lead the parents to opt for a *Jatiya Bidyalay*. It examines the brand value of '*Jatiya Bidyalay',* the different visual advertisements that are used by such schools and what makes parents choose such a school for their children.

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.