CHAPTER 2

Private schools and language politics in Assam

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, there is an attempt to contextualise the study by looking at the historical background of the field of education in the state of Assam, India, with a focus on private schools. The background is focused on the colonial period and after. The region that we now know as Assam more or less existed politically as an independent state for the most part of first two millennia, except for brief intervals. Assam formally became a part of British India from 1826 and therefore, colonial policies shaped the developments here. The changes in the field of education in Assam can only be understood along with the politics of language that was entangled from the very beginning of the colonial rule. But before we look at these processes, there is a need for a brief general background of the region and the language under question.

Assamese is one of the 22 scheduled languages of the Indian state and is spoken by more than 15 million or 1.5 crore people. It is considered part of the Indo-Aryan family of languages and has affinities with other languages in this group, like Bengali, Maithili, Hindi and so on. The majority of the speakers are confined to the state of Assam. Assam in ancient times was known as *Kamrup* and was ruled by Hindu kings who patronised *Sanskrit* till up to the beginning of the thirteenth century (Barpujari, 2007, p. 264). As such, *Sanskrit* remained the court language for most part of the first millennium and much into the second. Most of the literature that emerged from *Kamrup* during this time was in *Sanskrit* (ibid). The language of the masses, however, was a type of *Prakrit* that was known as *Kamrupi Prakrit* or simply *Kamrupi*. *Hieun Tsang*, the Buddhist Chinese pilgrim who visited *Kamrup* in the first half of the 7th century C.E. mentions that 'the language of *Kamrup* differs slightly from those in the central parts of the country' (Barpujari, 2007, p. 120). The language did not have a written form at that stage but epigraphs as early as 5-6th century show some proto-formation of the written language (Barpujari, 2007, p. 264-267). The Buddhist *Caryapradas* of the 8th-10th century also bear traces of the language (ibid), although these are claimed by other languages like Bengali,

Oriya as well. Apart from *Kamrupi*, other languages that were spoken by the masses were of Tibeto-Burmese origin also didn't have any written script. It was only from the 13th century that distinct literature in *Kamrupi* emerged (Barpujari, 2004, p. 276), roughly the same time around which literature in other Indian vernaculars emerged, and much of it emerged under the *Koch* kingdom that was in its peak during the 16th century. From the 17th century, the centre of power shifted to the eastern side of the region that was ruled by the *Ahoms* from the 13th century onwards. This region was called Assam, i.e. the country ruled by the Ahoms. Here, another variety of the language was spoken that differed slightly from the western regions and could also be traced to the *Caryapadas* (Barpujari, 2004, p. 277). The Ahoms had their own Tai language but had adopted this language that was widely spoken. Due to the stability of the Ahom rule for many centuries in the eastern regions, the language attained some uniformity (Kakati, 1941). The overlordship of the Ahoms from the 17th century onwards led to the consolidation of their rule and the entire region, namely the Brahmaputra valley came under their dominion. This entire region came to be known as Assam and the language as Asamiya (from Assam) or now, the anglicised Assamese, which was codified and standardised once the British rule started in 1826. Therefore, Asamiya or Assamese as a language has a long history. The modern Assamese language emerged from *Kamrupi Prakrit*, and early Assamese literature was in *Kamrupi* (Barpujari, 2004, p. 277; Barpujari, 2007, p. 265) but in the later years, the literature was in the language version that eventually became the standard. *Kamrupi* now is considered one of the dialects of the standard Assamese and is used, although there are many versions of it, in the western parts of Assam. The present study is located in Kamrup (Metropolitan) district of which Guwahati forms a major part.

I give this brief background to throw light on an important question. Does the separation of the vernacular language *Kamrupi* from *Sanskrit* signify some kind of language politics of that time? Was it considered a mother tongue? Was there any kind of linguistic identification? While examining language politics in the medieval ages is beyond the scope of this work, Benei (2007) says that there has been a debate on this issue, as to whether there was indeed a notion of 'mother tongue' among Indian vernacular speakers prior to the nineteenth century. She says that some scholars like Bayly, Ramanujan have

provided evidence of linking regional languages with mother tongues. On the other hand, she says that scholars like Pollock, Ramaswamy etc. have pointed out that the concept of mother tongue in India emerged only during the nineteenth century under European philological influences and this concept was largely alien to vernacular speakers in India (Benei, 2007, p 84). In the light of contrasting views, it seems that although there might have been some politics of language, i.e. of the regional languages vis-à-vis Sanskrit, the evidence for linguistic identification or a linguistic community is limited. Communities were mostly religious, regional or caste-based and the concept of a mother tongue was non-existent. Nonetheless, the notion of mother tongue is a powerful one in Assam today and can evoke strong sentiments among those who identify with it. Education in the mother-tongue is a sentimental issue.

2.2 Schools in pre-colonial period in Assam

Mass education till recent times was not the norm in the country. In pre-colonial times, in India education was mostly religious and private initiative. Although there was no centralised and uniform education system as such, one can infer the state of education by examining historically important centres of education. In Assam during medieval times, education was mostly private. Formal education was imparted in *tols*, *catuspathis* and *pathshalas* by *gurus* and *adhyapakas* who were well versed in their fields (Barpujari, 2004, p. 299). There was no mass education and formal learning was confined to the upper stratum of the society (Brahmans, Kayasthas and Kalitas) and to men (ibid). The *gurukula* system was followed where students used to reside within the compound of the teacher's house (ibid). Kings were patrons of learning. The Koch king, *Naranarayana* and his brother, *Chilarai* received their education in Banaras while the Ahom king *Rudra Singha* (1696-1714) established a number of schools at different places in his kingdom (ibid, p. 301). Assam is also well-known for its religious institutions called *Satras* which were started by Bhakti reformer Sankardev and his disciple, Madhabdev[3]. *Satras* are religious institutions like *mandirs* (temples) but there are no idols and have space where devotees can gather and sing devotional songs to the lord. *Satras* were important institutions of learning and they used to maintain schools as well as *tols* for teaching

[3] Satras or Vaishnav monasteries were established by Sankardev and Madhabdev from 15th century onwards

disciples. These were also training grounds for arts and crafts (Barpujari, 2004, p. 302). The *Satra* and its village wing, the *namghar* (village prayer hall). served as a means of spreading education. Although there was no mass education, these played a part in the diffusion of religious and ethical learning among the masses, even to the women through their husbands (ibid). These institutions were very powerful and wielded considerable influence, often countering the state. Since *Satras* played an important role in imparting education, this only shows the private nature of education in those times. Apart from this, there was also teaching and learning of *astrology, ayurveda* (traditional Indian medicine) and *tantra* in different parts of Assam. Assam, thus, had a vibrant indigenous educational system in place. The community was largely caste based or religion based but a distinct community centred around language was yet to emerge. But some drastic developments that began from colonial rule forever changed the relationship between language, education and identity.

2.3 Language politics and colonial rule in India

Assam, just like the rest of India was characterised by a multilingual landscape. However, monolingual ideas of language (Anderson, 1983; Woolard and Schieffelin,1994) that spread to much of Europe resulting in the formation of linguistic nation-state there, came with the British colonisers to India. This resulted in the emergence of standard languages in a region otherwise characterised by immense linguistic diversity. The setting up of modern schools to teach these standard languages, the emergence of language-based communities (nationalities) around these languages and the institutionalisation of the English language in Indian Universities and colleges etc. led to a complete transformation of the relationship between language and politics in the country. Language came to be a marker of group identity, it was viewed as private property of a group, linguistic identities emerged and educational institutes played an important role in promoting and legitimising certain varieties of languages.

Pre-colonial India was a different world altogether when it came to language. Sudipto Kaviraj (2009) argues that the language was perceived differently in India, where the sound was given more importance as compared to Europe, where the primacy of the written is emphasized over the spoken. Alterations in the linguistic structure started

during the medieval times owing to the political power of the Muslim rule. He stresses that religious developments were important in the development of languages and during the medieval ages, there occurred a slow development of vernacular languages through the gradual separation of their emerging literatures from the high Sanskrit tradition. He claims that people's identities during this period were primarily belonging to a religious sect rather than one of common speech. There was already perhaps an identity of language, but no linguistic identity. Linguistic identity is not formed by the simple objective fact of some people having a common language; it lies in a more deliberate choice to see this fact as the essential criterion of their identity (Kaviraj, 2009, p. 315-320).

He comments on the languages that existed in a particular social world at that time and says that groups were fuzzily conceived. It was not an enumerated world but rather a fuzzy world, of fuzzily sensed time and space. There were boundaries of course, but they were not drawn the way it is now represented in maps; rather they tended to shade off, merge and graduate. It was a world of transitions rather than boundaries. He argues that this applied to languages as well. Self-identifications were in some senses fuzzy and indistinct. Distinct languages could exist in this society without uniting or dividing people in the manner of modern-day societies. Kaviraj argues that British colonial rule introduced decisive and irreversible changes in the structure of Indian society. It restructured society in fundamental ways. One of the major changes brought about by the colonialists was standardization in the areas of spoken and literary languages. The arrival of printing facilitated the standardization process and once this standard or norm became established, elites or aspirants to elite status began to emulate its accents and written idioms. Gradually there emerged a political community around language or speech. Commenting on identity formation, Kaviraj says that the identities of region and nation are both products of the same historical-cultural processes which produced a mapped world out of a fuzzy world. Political identities based on language are therefore modern though the languages on which they are based have distinct historical existence from much earlier times (ibid, p. 328-330).

B.S Cohn (1985) says that the colonial rule led to the appropriation and objectification of Indian languages by the colonisers. With the help of grammars, dictionaries, treatises, text books, and translations about and from the languages of India, colonial officers converted Indian forms of knowledge into European objects. The knowledge of languages was necessary to issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order, and also to create other forms of knowledge about the people they were ruling. The knowledge was to enable the British to classify, categorize, and bound the vast social world (India) so that it could be controlled. Indian languages also were used as languages of command by the colonial officials for communication. Colonial officers made great efforts to study Indian languages and it was part of the colonial project of control and command (Cohn, 1985, p. 21-25). This was the time when there was a process of classifying and standardising languages for better control over territories. And this happened through setting up of schools and colleges. The role of colonial linguistics, where alien speech enormously complex linguistic situations were framed in languages more similar to Europeans, is important in this context (Errington, 2001). According to Errington, colonial linguistics can be seen as a nexus of technology (literacy), reason, and faith and as a project of multiple conversions: of pagan to Christian, of speech to writing, and of the alien to the comprehensible (Errington, 2001, p. 21). Also, the missionaries' linguistic work is important for its role in the assertion of spiritual dominion through language. He suggests that colonial rule reproduced European modes of territoriality on a smaller scale which assumed bounded linguistic and cultural homogeneity among national citizenries within sovereign European states. Colonial states and missionary jurisdictions shared a territorial logic that reflected in colonial linguistic work, presupposing mappings of monolithic languages onto demarcated boundaries and within these boundaries were thought to be ethno-linguistically homogenous groups that were localized, and naturalized as 'tribes' or 'ethnicities'. These assumptions about the naturalness of monoglot conditions helped Europeans grapple with bewildering linguistic diversity. Errington further says that the missionary endeavours resulted in sociolinguistic hierarchies which were similar to those in Europe. As missionary centres offered unequal access to print-mediated forms of speech, they engendered a differential sense of language-linked identities (ibid, p. 23-24).

Errington suggests that colonial linguists helped to create common languages which they understood to be normal versions of the language whose degenerate versions they encountered. Also, colonial regimes created conditions that produced creole languages. Both were of high utility and crucial for business but lacked native speakers and low in prestige. There were evident underlying tensions between colonial ideologies of languages as markers of identity and the need for effective communication across linguistic differences. This sometimes resulted in a diglossic split of the languages between a 'high' and a 'low' (ibid, p. 25-30).

Due to all these developments, standardised languages emerged in an otherwise extremely diverse linguistic landscape. And this happened across the country in different regions. There was linguistic nationalism, although that was realised at the regional level. The new ideology (of modern linguistic ethnicity) dictated that territorial space itself must be culturally (or at least linguistically) homogenous and thus India became a society of language *jatis* much as it had previously been one of caste *jatis* (Washbrook, 1991 as cited in Sarangi, 2009, p. 6). This, however, does not mean that caste-based *jatis* disappeared and were replaced by language-based *jatis.* Rather, the standard languages facilitated larger communities (*jatis*) that circumscribed certain regions that included the caste groups in that region. But it was not uniform throughout the country. The case in north India was slightly different where religion was the primary line of cleavage while language was a secondary one (Brass, 1974). Here, although religion was the dominant marker of group identity, yet there was an underlying layer of language conflict that revolved mainly around Hindi and Urdu. Hindi subsumed many other languages that were considered its dialects and became increasingly sanskritised while Urdu came to have more and more Persian and Arabic influences. In this Hindi-Urdu linguistic conflict which was tinged with Hindu-Muslim differences from the beginning (Brass, 2004) educational institutes like the Deoband school, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and Banaras Hindu University (BHU) played a significant role. In other parts of India like in South and the East, it was language that became the primary marker of group identity like Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, Assamese and so on. One might argue that linguistic unification did take place at the regional level in India.

2.4 Private schools in colonial India

It is now widely accepted, unlike previously held notions, that most parts of India had a well-established education system during pre-colonial times (Dharampal, 1983). Although there was no mass education, there was a system of indigenous schools that catered to the learning needs of multitude of groups, be it caste or religious. This system was largely private in nature. However, the colonial rule and its various policies led to the death of the indigenous system and this was supplanted by a modern education system (Jain, 2018). This modern education system, on the other hand, was largely sponsored by the government, and it led to a number of government schools or public schools. The indigenous private schools died out but new kinds of private schools also emerged along with the government schools during this time. This setting up of the public education system was shaped by the various policies of the company and the crown. When it comes to education policy, the Charter Act of 1813, Macaulay's Minute of Education of 1835 and Wood's Despatch of 1854 deserve mention. The Charter Act made education the responsibility of Company's government (Barpujari, 2007, p. 348). It also permitted the missionaries to go and reside in India under certain conditions (Barpujari, 1986, p. xii). However, it was not until the appointment of the General Committee of Public Instruction in 1823 that definite steps were taken for the promotion of education of native India (Barpujari, 2007, p. 348). But as the Committee began to take steps for the spread of education there were disagreements among two camps, one the Orientalists who focussed on classical Indian languages and the other the Anglicists who prioritised English over Indian languages (ibid). The orientalist policy was in its prime during the later parts of 18^{th} century and early 19^{th} century when the East India Company encouraged learning of the classical languages like Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic (Jain, 2018, p. 44).

It was the Charter Act of 1813 where finances were allocated for Indian education that was a cornerstone in setting up the modern education system in India. It encouraged the missionaries to set up many private schools to spread religious teaching. Many of them were in vernacular languages but there were English schools as well. Macaulay, who belonged to the Anglicist camp, his Minute of Education of 1835 laid and legitimised the foundation of a colonial system of education. English came to be a prestige language and

a new language hierarchy emerged in the country in which English was followed by prestige varieties of Hindi and other regional languages (Goswami, 2017). During the second half of the 19th century, Indians were encouraged to collaborate with the colonial government for meeting the educational needs of the people (Jain, 2018). The Woods despatch of 1854 wherein a system of grant-in-aid was established led to the setting up of a large number of private schools (Jain, 2018, p. 46), mostly in vernacular languages. The missionaries were the pioneers in the initial years in setting up the new kind of private schools but they were later outnumbered by the Indians in this endeavour (ibid, p. 47). In this setting up of private schools, the politics of various communities played a part. In the new enumerated world where there were fixed boundaries, different religious, caste and linguistic communities sought a new self-identity (ibid, p. 36). These groups also competed for a share in colonial employment, education and representative politics (ibid). Thus 'education was one site where boundaries and identities of the communities were reconstituted and mobilised' (ibid). Indians took the benefit of the grant-in-aid system and there was an increase in the private enterprise (ibid).

Jain (2018) suggests that among Indians, there were different trends when it came to the establishment of private schools in the country. The first is that the upper castes and landowning elites in Bengal who preferred English education established English-medium secondary schools for their children The second was as economic mobility and education increased among the so-called untouchable communities, new private schools emerged as a response to these developments where upper castes sought admission. The third was wealthy landlords and local kings who contributed to the reform movements that established many private schools, especially in Punjab. The fourth was tribal and untouchable communities that emerged as new political subjects and opened schools for themselves. Lastly, missionaries also encouraged Indians to set up schools to promote schools among the depressed classes and tribal communities. The motivations among Indians for their efforts and initiatives were maintaining social dominance, promoting social mobility of their groups, creating a cohesive group and self-identity, defining collective goals and disseminating cultural norms (Jain, 2018, p.42).

While this was roughly the scenario in 19th century, in the first half of the 20th century, big grants were made for education by the state that led to the expansion of public schools. Also, the grant-in-aid to private schools was increased to encourage these schools to seek recognition and achieve higher standards (Jain, 2018, p. 49). Due to the increased awakening among Indians, there was an increase in private contributions to education (ibid). When it comes to language preferences for the schools, be it public or private, there were stark provincial differences. There was a preference for English-medium education in Bengal Presidency, while both English and vernacular languages were preferred in Madras Presidency and in Bombay Presidency, more prominence was given to vernacular languages (Benei, 2005, p. 147). Assam was made part of the Bengal province in the initial years of the colonial rule and here the question of language was a major one from the very beginning.

2.5 Assam context

2.5.1 Private schools in Colonial Assam (1826-1873)

The year 1826 marks the beginning of colonial rule in the state. Assam was linguistically diverse, there were no modern schools and the masses had no formal schooling. However, there was an indigenous system of education. Initially, the indigenous schools were left undisturbed and David Scott, the agent to the Governor-General, North East Frontier continued to make land grants to these institutions as was the practice of the former government that led to the establishment of eleven, later increased to sixteen such schools all over Assam in 1826 (Chakravarty, 1971, p. 9-10). This was the first instance of colonial officers mediating in the matters of education in Assam. Some students who studied in these schools were given jobs in government service by Adam White, the collector of Guwahati in 1831 (ibid). White collaborated with James Rae who was a member of the Serampur Missionary Society and started an elementary English school at Guwahati in the same year (ibid). Francis Jenkins, who became the agent of the Governor-General, North-East Frontier and the Commissioner of Assam encouraged English education and in 1835, the first English school was established at Guwahati (Chakravarty, 1971, p. 15). Another such school was established in upper Assam for the education of the members of the Ahom royal family and sons of the gentry at Sibsagar,

the former capital city of the Ahom rulers, in 1841 and branch schools started in Jorhat and Jaypur as well (Barpujari, 2007, p. 350). The colonial officers did not just set up English schools, they also started vernacular schools. Lieutenant Bogle, the Commissioner of Kamrup emphasised vernacular education and his successor James Matthie is credited to have spread mass education in rural areas (Chakravarty, 1971, p. 19-20). The initial sixteen schools set up by Scott were increased to twenty-two and they were converted into *village schools* which were vernacular schools (Barpujari, 2007, p. 351). There was demand for such schools among the villagers due to the introduction of the new land revenue system wherein *patta* (or land deeds/titles) were introduced for the first time Kamrup in 1832-34 (Chakravarty, 1971, p. 20). To have a rudimentary knowledge of the three r's (reading, writing, arithmetic) and to safeguard themselves from the deceptive practices of the bureaucratic offices or *amlahs,* villagers demanded such schools. Demand was also high for English education and there were some branch schools that sprung up in many parts of Guwahati entirely at the expense of the public (Barpujari, 2007, p. 351). The *patta* also played a part in the demand. Although students were attracted to English education, due to the unfamiliarity of the language, soon the numbers dwindled and both the schools at Guwahati and Sibsagar were made Anglo-Vernacular (ibid). The local authorities tried to increase the number of vernacular schools for the spread of education when the improvement of English schools posed a problem (ibid). Thus, colonial education supplanted the earlier education system and new schools, both in English as well as the vernacular operated in the state. However, progress was slow in this field with a very small percentage of students going to school. There was widespread apathy of the common people towards education as it was deemed useless and for those attending the only motive was the prospect of getting government jobs (Chakravarty, 1971, p. 28). And when this objective was not achieved, their interest waned (ibid, p.29).

The Wood's Despatch of 1854 which favoured mass education led to a rapid increase in the vernacular schools in Assam which were private in nature (Barpujari, 2007, p. 351). They were self-supporting and were mostly established in the hope of obtaining aid from the government (Chakravarty, 1971, p. 36). In the next decade, many government schools were shut down and to compensate the system of grants to the vernacular schools was

introduced (ibid). But progress was still slow, due to the continuation of using Bengali as the medium of instruction that was not intelligible to the majority (ibid, p. 41). Only after Assamese was reinstated as the medium of instruction and Assam separated from Bengal and was made a separate province, did the pace of education pick up.

2.5.2 The contentious issue of the medium of instruction

After the colonial rule began in 1826, there were some attempts to reinstate the old aristocracy but it didn't materialise (Barpujari, 2007, p. 349). At that time, Persian was the court language of the province of Bengal and initially Persian was introduced in Assam as well (Barpujari, 1986, p. xxxiv). But it was monetarily unfeasible as Persian writers had to be paid higher salaries and were difficult to replace in cases of death or long absence (ibid). It was replaced by Bengali in the year 1836 as a solution (ibid). As Britishers consolidated their rule and extended their territorial boundaries which covered large areas of what is today's north-east India, Assam which came to represent this region, was kept under the administrative control of Bengal and the local authorities, for their administrative convenience, introduced Bengali as a language of the courts and schools in Assam (ibid). These schools were state-run schools where the medium of instruction was either English or Bengali. In the vernacular schools, Bengali was used as the medium of instruction and in the Anglo-Vernacular schools, English and Bengali were used. The roots of language politics in Assam and the formation of a community based on language can be traced to this important development. Thus, the identity question got tied up with schools and the medium of instruction. With Bengali being used for official matters in Assam, seeds of consciousness of 'language as a private property of a group' were planted slowly in the minds of the Assamese with Bengali perceived as the other's language that was imposed on them. This, however, does not mean that the people of Assam were not conscious of their differences with their neighbours in Bengal. The difference in consciousness was however, more geographical, rather than linguistic. The term *bongal* (literally Bengal) was frequently used in Assam in earlier times and it referred to outsiders and those coming from Bengal, with the Mughals also being referred to as *bongal*, even Britishers were called *boga bongal* (white/fair outsider) (Baruah, 2012). It must be stated that at this stage, there was no middle-class intelligentsia to

oppose such imposition (Barpujari, 1986, p. xxxv). Yet, there was opposition against Bengali being used as a medium of instruction but that came from unexpected quarters – the missionaries. And these missionaries were later assisted by the newly emerging middle-class in Assam who would go on to become the torchbearers of Assamese linguistic nationalism in the later years.

2.5.3 The Christian missionaries as saviours of the Assamese language

The role of the Christian missionaries in legitimising and establishing Assamese as an official language in the province of Assam was central. The language used in courts and schools was Bengali and Assamese as a language was considered as *patois* of Bengali by some colonial officers like Robinson. The missionaries were driven by monolingual ideas of language and language purity that prevailed in much of the West during those times. The Charter Act of 1813 permitted the missionaries to stay in India under certain conditions and this paved the way for their arrival from England and America (Barpujari, 1986, p. xii). Even before this, William Carey had established the Serampur Mission as a branch of the English Baptist Mission in January 1800 (ibid). It was Carey and his collaborators' efforts that led to the translation of the Bible to different Indian languages including Assamese in 1813/1819 (Barpujari,1986; Kakati, 1941). This publication also marks the beginning of the modern period of the Assamese language (Kakati, 1941). The third and fourth decades of the 19th century saw many missionaries arriving in hill and plain areas of the Brahmaputra valley, including Nathan Brown, Oliver Cutter, Miles Bronson and others and their primary goal was evangelism (Barpujari, 1986). Therefore, elementary education became necessary so that the Bible could be read and understood (ibid). Missionaries set up their printing press as Sadiya in the eastern corner of Assam in 1836, came up with primers, nursery books, and textbooks in Assamese, English and other tribal languages and taught these in the schools that they set up. They used Assamese as a medium of instruction in their schools unlike the state-run schools that used Bengali at that time. It must be emphasised that the missionaries followed the same classificatory mechanisms (colonial linguistics) where they tried to enumerate a fuzzy word. Nathan Brown was a linguist of repute and was the first missionary to raise warnings against the introduction of Bengali in the newly started village schools

(Barpujari, 1986, p. xxxiv). He was convinced that Assamese was a distinct language and not a dialect or *patois* or a corrupt version of Bengali as many colonial officers believed at that time. "He not only wanted to make Assamese the language of teaching and preaching but to have Assamese of the purest form as spoken in Upper Assam" (Barpujari 1986, p. xxxiv). Missionary efforts helped to provide legitimacy to Assamese as a distinct language from Bengali. The missionaries' monthly periodical called *Arunaday*, which was published in the Assamese language from 1846, Nathan Brown's publication of the first grammar book of Assamese titled *Grammatical notes of the Assamese language*, in 1848, and Miles Bronson's first dictionary in Assamese and English in the year 1867, apart from the numerous primers and textbooks they published in Assamese helped the cause of the Assamese language. Not to mention the numerous schools that they established in the valley where they used Assamese as the medium of instruction.

The missionaries' advocacy for Assamese as a medium of instruction in schools found support in members of the newly emerged middle-class, especially Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, who urged the substitution of Assamese in place of Bengali in schools of Assam in his petition to A.J. Mofatt Mills, judge Sadar Dewani Adawlat titled *Observations on the Administration* in 1953 (Barpujari, 1986, p. xxxv). Bronson espoused the cause of the Assamese language and with the death of Anandaram in 1959, and the departure of Brown, fought a lone battle against pro-Bengali elements (ibid). In 1872, Bronson and other members of the Assamese elite were able to convince the Lieutenant- Governor that their demands were reasonable and in 1873, the Governor agreed that Assamese be introduced in schools and courts in the Brahmaputra valley (ibid). It must also be mentioned that from 1874 onwards, Assam was detached from the administrative control of Bengal and existed as a separate Chief Commissionership (Guha, 1991).

While these details are noteworthy it must be emphasised that by mid of the 19th century, the consciousness of a distinct Assamese identity began to form, the pioneer being Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. A language-based community was slowly emerging. Assamese-Bengali relations were getting antagonistic on the issues of language, the fault lines of which are visible even today. The relations were not really hostile though, with

both groups competing for a share of the resources, but in the next century it became more antagonistic and even turned violent in some cases. Generally, the years from 1836-1873 are considered dark ages for the Assamese language. However, once it was recognised as a distinct language and used in courts and schools from 1873 onwards, the language thrived. Numerous textbooks and other reading materials were published by the missionaries as well as those from the Assamese middle class. Missionary efforts, combined with those of the emerging middle class led to establishing Assamese as a language of the courts and schools, a politically conscious language-based community, a *jati* emerged and there was also a process of linguistic and cultural unification[4] of the region that was in motion. Schools also multiplied many times mostly due to private initiative.

2.5.4 The state of schooling (1873-1947)

Assam became a separate province from 1873 onwards. The number of schools also swelled up many-fold. From 204 primary schools in 1871-72, the number of such schools rose to 1351 in 1882-83 (Barpujari, 2007, p. 357). Meanwhile, the first education commission in 1882 held the view that private enterprise was able to provide and meet the educational needs of the people and if the government withdrew from the scene, the progress of education would be more wholesome (Chakravarty, 1971, p. 54). Therefore, for the promotion of mass education, it recommended the rapid growth of schools nurtured by the local population (ibid). Accordingly, it allowed grants for schools that teach the three r's in the vernacular (ibid). The existing indigenous schools that imparted religious education like *tols* and *maktabs* did not qualify for these grants as they were not secular and their numbers decreased. There was also a recommendation of 'Payment by Result' in the commission (Choudhury and Dutta, 2013, p. 38). The Education Commission of 1882 made primary education the responsibility of local boards (Chakravarty, 1971; Choudhury and Dutta, 2013) and stressed that secondary schools should be handed over to private management without lowering the standard of

[4] The linguistic and cultural unification was not smooth but had its share of tensions between upper Assam and lower Assam. People in lower Assam accepted the upper Assam language variety as standard Assamese but retained the distinction between *kothito* (spoken) and *likhito* (written) versions (Sharma, 2006).

instruction (Barpujari, 2007, p. 358). But this policy of withdrawal of the government also led to many evils as many of these private schools were ill-equipped and poorly staffed (ibid).

From the 20th century onwards, there was a change in the earlier policy of *laissez-faire* and the government contributed towards the spread of primary education. It sanctioned one lakh rupees and established schools in remote locations where there were no such facilities available (Chakravarty, 1971). In 1904-1906, there were about seven hundred lower primary schools established (ibid). Lord Curzon's policy was of 'control and improvement' instead of 'withdrawal and expansion'. The grant-in-aid to private schools was increased to encourage private schools to seek recognition (Jain, 2018). This found fulfilment only when the Government of Assam decided to provincialize most of the aided high schools at Sub-Divisional headquarters following the resolution of Government of India (1913) (Barpujari, 2007). During 1919-1930, efforts were made to introduce free compulsory education for all children (Choudhury and Dutta, 2013). At the time of independence, Assam had 191 High schools, 421 Middle schools, 316 Vernacular schools and 7574 Primary schools (ibid, p. 40). It would seem that the primary schools were in the vernacular languages, mostly Assamese.

2.6 The role of the middle class

The emerging middle class played the most vital role in the unification of the Assamese community. This middle class in Assam was a product of the British administration just like their counterparts in other parts of the country (Gohain, 1973; Barpujari, 2007). Many individuals from this class were influenced by the cultural activities of the Christian missionaries and also directly/indirectly by the Bengal Renaissance[5] (Guha, 1991), which was led by the middle-class elites in Bengal (Barpujari, 2007). This class mostly comprised of the well-to-do members of the caste Hindus, and was not formed from the ranks of the former nobility, under whom the caste Hindus had previously served as their clerks and bureaucrats (Gohain, 1973) and with this, the leadership of the community passed from the old aristocracy to the articulate middle-class elite (Barpujari, 2007), suggesting the historical process of circulation of elites by Pareto.

[5] Bengal Renaissance refers to the social reformation in Bengal in the late 18th century and 19th century.

The middle class in their formative years offered support to the British (Gohain 1973; Baruah 1986). Except for Maniram Dewan who initially collaborated with the British but later turned against them and took part in the Mutiny of 1857 for which he was hanged, most others cherished great faith in the benevolence of the British rule (Baruah, 1986). They were not too concerned with the interests of the rural poor but were driven by their own class-interests (ibid). When Assamese was recognised as a language of courts and schools, it gave them great self-confidence and they began to express themselves through the multitude of literary and political organisations that sprung up years after (ibid). Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's petition to Mofatt Mills was mentioned earlier. But his literary contributions to the Assamese language also deserve mention. He wrote numerous articles in Arunoday in the 50s, and published an Assamese primer called *Asamiya Lorar Mitra* (1849) while his famous work was *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on the Vernacular Education in Assam* (1855) (Guha, 1991). Maniram Dewan also compiled an interesting historical work in Assamese under the title *Buranji – Viveka Ratna* but it was never published (ibid). Gunabhiram Barua also wrote articles in Arunoday and he is credited to have written the first modern social drama in Assamese named *Ram-Navami Natak* (ibid). Hemchandra Barua, Bolinarayan Bora, Jagnanath Baruah, Manik Chandra Baruah, Lakshminath Bezbaruah and many others played their part. Not only starting periodicals in Assamese, contributing to these periodicals and helping to establish literary organisations but some of them were also involved in successfully lobbying with the Britishers for establishment of educational institutes. Manik Chandra Baruah's contribution in the setting up of Cotton College in 1900, the first college to be established in Assam, is an example. These efforts continued into the next century as well. Due to their efforts numerous schools and colleges were set up.

2.6.1The middle class and its affinity for English

While the middle class took immense pains and fought for the recognition and promotion of the Assamese language and against Bengali imposition, they had a more cordial relationship with English from the very beginning. This is understandable since their class positions, being that of the intermediaries between the government and the masses,

were tied to the knowledge of English which was necessary to secure a job under the government. There was a high demand for English in the beginning from all sections of the population. Even ordinary folk wished to have an English education lest they will be cheated by the corrupt officers of the court. But the beginners found it difficult to grasp the language and there was a fall in enrolment. Thus, the masses turned apathetic towards English education, owing to the orthodoxy of the times as well as the unintelligible foreign language (Baruah, 1987). Prejudices prevailed against Western education. The schools were despised because they violated traditional taboos and mixed-up castes and communities (Gohain, 1973). But the new middle-class was quick to understand the advantage of this education for their progeny (ibid). Dina Nath Bezbaruah, father of Lakshminath Bezbaruah[6], was at first allergic to English education but later on took the lead in founding in English school (ibid). In the later half the 19th century, there was a great urge for English education in Assam and a section of the people, the upper and the middle classes, considered it as a sound investment and were also prepared to pay for it (Barpujari, 2007, p. 360). The efforts of the educated elite in co-operation with a number of officials resulted in the establishment of a number of institutions, public and private, and also led to an increase in enrolment (ibid). As education spread there emerged the upper middle-class elite in and around the district and sub-divisional headquarters and they consisted of large public servants and salaried employees (ibid). And this class was mostly concerned with its own interests rather than the masses in general. It demanded more of English education at higher levels than education of the masses in vernacular (ibid, p. 373). As we shall see later, the middle classes' affinity for English which was there from the very beginning would lead to a crisis in Assamese education in the 80s.

2.7 Private schools in post-independence period in India

When India became independent, it inherited the legacy of the colonial education system that was a mix of government and private initiative. There existed a good number of private schools at that time. The Indian state in 1950 made efforts to provide free and compulsory education for all children until age 14 (Choudhury and Dutta, 2013).

[6] Bezbaruah's contribution was instrumental in modern Assamese nationality formation in early 20th century. He engaged in bitter debates with intellectuals of the time but his ideas mostly prevailed. The symbols that the community celebrates today emerged from these debates (Sharma, 2006).

Education was essentially a state subject till 1976 and therefore the central government's role was limited to running institutions of higher education (ibid). There was also a challenge of language or the medium of instruction. The languages of the respective regional states were used as a medium of instruction in those regions. To develop a curriculum, textbooks in these languages compounded the problem (ibid). In India, owing to the linguistic complexities and sensitivities of the country, the National Education Policy 1968 suggested the three-language formula (TLF). The formula made the provision that secondary schools were required to teach the regional language of the state, in addition to Hindi and English.

The Education Commission of 1964-66 noted that at different levels of schooling, private institutes were about one-third of total institutions but dominated pre-primary and secondary schools (Jain, 2018, p. 54-55). The Kothari Commission classified private schools into three categories - recognised and aided, recognised but unaided or independent and unrecognised (ibid). The recognised and aided schools had close links with the community, the independent schools were those that charged high fees, were English medium and were considered prestigious and the unrecognised schools were a heterogenous group of schools about which not much was known (ibid). The 70s and the 80s saw centralisation of power of the Indian State. In the 70s, education was shifted to the concurrent list and the central government started assuming a greater role for educational change interventions (Jain et al, 2018, p. 9-10). In the 80s and 90s, there were large scale centrally driven programmes in elementary education and the many treaties that India signed reinforced the agenda of universalisation of elementary education (ibid). This was also the time when structural reforms led to a complete transformation of the workings of the Indian state and economy. The centrally sponsored scheme – the Sarba Shiksha Abhiyan, the centrally sponsored flagship programme, became the principal vehicle through which the Indian state would pursue the objective of universalisation of education, from 2001 onwards (ibid).

This move established primary education as a right but it allowed the private schools to function along with the government schools. This led to a massive expansion and enrolment into the government school system, and simultaneously there was an

expansion of the private sector, especially driven by low fees schools. As the school system expanded, the middle class which was gradually expanding all these years, and their aspirations found new expression and started exiting the government and government- aided provisioning of vernacular education in favour of a range of private schools (Jain et al, 2018, p. 11). These private schools comprised a range of schools, from the elite schools catering to the very rich, with middle range schools catering to the middle classes and the low fee ones catering to the poor. Jain et al (2018) argue that what united these schools was the tag of English-medium education, which has come to signify cultural capital in the post-liberalisation years (ibid).

2.8 Education in Assam

In Assam, a number of high schools were set up through private effort and mobilisation (Choudhury and Dutta, 2013). But on the other hand, government initiative in establishing high schools virtually stopped (ibid). Instead, the state government had a policy of taking over non-government high schools and ME (Middle English) schools under the grant-in-aid system. This was nothing new but had continued since colonial times. These were known as venture schools in Assam. The community would take the initiative and start a school or college and it was expected that the government would take over (Goswami, 2021). Such a process started in the early 20th century and continued after independence. Such venture schools could request provincialization[7]. This encouraged the general public to set up schools (Choudhury and Dutta, 2013). Numerous such venture schools sprung up and such was the demand for coverage under the grant-in-aid system that the government had to impose restrictions on the opening of new such schools in 1998 (ibid). Among the government schools, meanwhile, there was a gradual deterioration and from this time onwards private schools that operated under the logic of the market also emerged. These were unaided schools that sought to make a profit through educational ventures. And this coincided with the structural changes in the Indian polity and economy from the 90s onwards. Many of these schools were in English medium but not all of them. Among these schools, we see the *Jatiya Bidyalyas* as well.

[7] Provincialization of schools refer to the process where the government takes over schools set up privately and takes the responsibility of the payment of teacher salaries etc.

To understand the emergence of these schools the post-colonial language politics is crucial.

2.9 Language politics in Assam after independence

After independence, the politics around language continued in Assam. Monolingual ideas of language dictated much of what was to come. The state of Assam saw one language issue after the after. Although Assamese was used as an official language, it did not have the status of a state language. There were demands for the language to be made a state language immediately after independence, with the Assam Sahitya Sabha taking the lead. Demonstrations were organised in many parts of the state in 1949, 1950 and into the decade of the 50s. There have been instances of recorded violence between Assamese and Bengalis in many parts of the state. With Assamese being one of the languages in the Eight Schedule it was in an advantageous position and later with the linguistic re-organisation of states, the claim was even stronger. The Sahitya Sabha continued to pressurise the state government in the 50s that their demands be met. The year 1960 saw numerous demonstrations, mob violence etc. and the government was forced to bring in a bill to pacify the agitating public.

2.9.1 Official state language agitation (1960)

In 1960, there was a bill tabled in the state Assembly whereby Assamese was to be made the state language of Assam which led to opposition from many tribes and also the Bengalis, especially in Cachar district. This is known as the state language agitation (Talukdar, 2020). This led to renewed clashes and conflict between the Assamese and Bengalis in many parts of the state. Bengalis in the pre-independence period were, one might say, in an advantageous position compared to the Assamese. The middle-class Bengali elite cornered the available government jobs in the very beginning, and later on were challenged in this domain by the middle-class Assamese. With Bengali as the official language during those times, they maintained their hegemony. When in 1874, Assam was re-constituted as a separate province, the district of Sylhet was added to it which had a predominantly Bengali population. So, although Assamese was used for official purposes, Bengalis never lost their influence. They had more or less the same population as the Assamese and many Bengali medium schools continued to operate in

this period till independence. But after independence, with Sylhet gone to East Pakistan, Bengalis were in a more disadvantaged position compared to earlier, although still influential (Dutta, 2012, p. 85). So, when this bill was tabled, there were fierce protests against it and Bengalis wanted Assam to be declared a bi-lingual state, a demand which was unacceptable to the Assamese (ibid). The state was on a boil for many months before the bill was tabled and it continued even after the Act was passed. Cotton College was at the centre of this agitation. In the mob violence and ensuing police firing, a student of the college Ranjit Barpujari was killed, who was declared as the first martyr of the language movement (ibid, p. 96).

As a political compromise, the Shastri formula was proposed where Assamese was to be used as the official language in Assam and Bengali to be used for official purposes in the three districts of Barak Valley where Bengalis are more in number. Those in Barak Valley continued their agitation and wanted Bengali as a state language but Shastri formula was implemented. Neither Assam Sahitya Sabha, nor the Bengalis were happy with the outcome (Dutta 2012, p. 102) but they couldn't do much.

2.9.2 The Medium of instruction movement (1972)

Barely a decade had passed, another issue shook the state. In 1970-72, there was a medium of instruction movement where Guwahati University introduced Assamese as a medium of instruction under all its colleges, which was to take effect in 1972. With Assamese as the state language, it was felt that the language should be the sole medium of instruction in the state universities. The Indian government's language policy provided a justification for such a step. That the regional language should be the medium of instruction was recommended by the Education Commission (1964-66) (Dutta, 2012; Mahanta, 2023). The Assamese middle class wanted to see its language as the sole medium of instruction (Dutta, 2012). When Guwahati University (GU) proposed such a measure, and it was expected that the other two universities that existed at the time, namely Dibrugarh University as well as Assam Agricultural University, would follow in GU's footsteps, Bengalis became apprehensive and there were strong protests across the state. They demanded that Bengali should also be the medium of instruction along with Assamese (Dutta, 2012). To temper down the discontent, the Academic Council of

Guwahati University came up with a resolution that the medium of instruction will be Assamese and English but students will have the option to write the answers in Assamese, English and Bengali (Dutta, 2012; Mahanta, 2023). Instead of calming things down, it made matters worse. And this time the opposition came from the Assamese. Assam Sahitya Sabha (ASS) and All Assam Students Union (AASU) played the leading roles in this protest. The centre of protest was Guwahati University and Cotton University and this was also the beginning that AASU, which was established in 1967, came to be a force to reckon with (Mahanta, 2023). The clause for writing answers in Bengali was removed later on but the issue didn't die out. In the new resolution of the academic council, it was mentioned that Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in colleges under the jurisdiction of Guwahati University and English shall continue as an alternative medium of instruction till such time not exceeding 10 years as may be considered by the council (Dutta, 2012; Mahanta, 2023). Protests were from Bengali as well the other minority groups like tribes.

The government, in an attempt to placate the contending sides, on 23rd September 1972, resolved unanimously that the medium of instruction at the university stage in the Guwahati and Dibrugarh University should be Assamese, though English should be continued as an alternative medium but taking into consideration the people of Cachar (in Barak Valley), a separate university was proposed in Cachar district (Dutta, 2012). Ideally, it should have solved the crisis, but the Assamese found it unacceptable that Cachar should get a separate university. AASU, Assam Sahitya Sabha led the protests again. Those in Cachar were also opposed to the clause of the medium of instruction as it was against minority interests. The issue finally died out when the Chief Minister of Assam issued a statement announcing that the government had no intention of implementing the Assembly resolution (Dutta, 2012).

While this issue died out gradually, another language movement erupted in the state. In 1974, there was an agitation by the Bodos for the use of the Roman script as they were not happy with using the Assamese script which they thought of as an imposition (Talukdar, 2020). This was also the time when there was conflict and clash of interest between the Bodos and Assamese and the Roman script agitation was a part of that larger

conflict. Ultimately, the Bodos, as a compromise, settled for Devanagri script. And in 1979, Assam saw the beginning of the Assam Movement which was a six-year-long movement against foreigners.

2.9.3 The Assam Movement (1979-85)

The Assam Movement was a six-year long movement spearheaded by the AASU. Although it cannot be strictly called a language-based movement, and it was primarily an anti-foreigner agitation, nonetheless, the anxieties around language were also an important issue. in the movement since the increase in population of 'the outsiders' or 'foreigners' was considered a direct threat to the Assamese language and the *jati* (community) as a whole since it might reduce the Assamese speakers to a minority.

The Assam Movement came to an end on 31st December 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord where it was stated that two central universities and an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) would be established in the state of Assam. One university is in Barak Valley, now Assam University (est. 1994) the university that was proposed during the 1972 movement. But the Assamese also demanded and got for themselves another university in the valley, now Tezpur University (est. 1994) and an IIT that was established in Guwahati in 1994.

So, the state has seen numerous linguistic conflicts since independence. Overall, there was one crisis after the other in the state and the political atmosphere was charged up.

2.10 Existential crisis of the community

One might argue that there was an existential crisis in the community in the second half of the 20th century. This crisis, however, was not a new one. The crisis has accompanied the Assamese nationality ever since its formation and the community emerged in a dialectical tension from within this crisis. This community's tension with the Bengalis was not just about language in the very beginning when Bengali was used for official purposes in 1836-37. Britishers tried creating an educated middle class among the former nobility in Assam but they were found to be seriously lacking in literary skills. As such men of rank had to be replaced by men of business, mostly from Bengal (Barpujari, 2007). These Bengali babus, known as '*Amlah*s' served as clerks and officers in the

bureaucracy and they had a monopoly over these jobs which created ill-feelings among the natives of Assam (ibid). While the emerging Assamese middle class later did offer competition with this elite section of the Bengalis during the 'dark ages of the Assamese language' (1837-1873), the Assamese elite could never attain hegemonic status and was always insecure. While this was one side of the story, at the end of the 19th and early 20th century, another development amplified this crisis. And that was the migration of Bengali Muslims from East Pakistan who were encouraged to settle in Assam as part of British policy (Baruah, 1999). This crisis was even more intensified in the period immediately before independence when Assam was proposed to be made part of East Pakistan by the Muslim League (Baruah, 1999; Guha, 1991; Sharma, 2006). It is no wonder that in the post-independence period, with Sylhet separated from Assam, the Assamese sighed a sense of relief (Guha, 1991) and the middle classes tried their best to solidify their position and the Assamese language through the 1960s and 72s movements described in the previous sections. But during independence, the period after that and during the Indo-Bangladesh war of 1971, many immigrants continued to pour into Assam, thus deeply arousing the anxieties of the indigenous population. The fact remains that there was a deep sense of crisis in the community and the tensions during the 60s and 70s and during the Assam movement in the 80s. The fear remained that the community would be rendered a minority in its own state and a reduced population would also lead to a reduced number of speakers of the language. Although the language had official status and was used as a medium of instruction in schools and even colleges, there was a deep sense of anxiety around language. Also, the fact that there were many regional states (Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland[8]) that were carved out of Assam during this time led to this crisis.

The Indian state was believed to be treating Assam unfairly by some sections of the population. To resist this, some even chose the path of violence. The 80s and 90s saw the peak of Assamese *jatiyatabaad* (nationalism) and there was widespread insurgency in the state. Various insurgent groups sprung up, the most prominent one being United

[8] When India attained independence, the state of Assam comprised of what is today's north-east, except Manipur and Tripura. Nagaland was separated from Assam in 1963, Meghalaya in 1971 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1972.

Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)[9] which demanded *Swadhin Assam* (sovereign Assam). In order to pressurise the Indian state, the ULFA indulged in many acts of violence. The counter-insurgency of the Indian state was also violent with widespread killings of the militants as well as their family members. Although the insurgency considerably weakened by the beginning of the next century and now has almost died out, the 80s and 90s were really turbulent. There was a deep sense of existential crisis in the community. Of course, not everyone wanted an independent Assam but the ULFA did enjoy popular support during those times (Baruah, 1999).

In terms of education, the school infrastructure expanded and many private schools also came up. The elite and upper-middle classes, like their Indian counterparts, started to migrate to the English medium schools. Ironically, the same class, which was the flagbearers of Assamese nationalism, had its affinity for English. The government schools were in bad shape and the private schools became the preferred schools for not only the middle class but also the poorer sections that were now aspiring to be middle class. In Assam, the shift to private English schools from government schools which were in Assamese medium, only heightened the anxieties around language and medium of instruction. The Assam Accord signed in 1985 between the government of India and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) did have some provisions for higher education like an IIT and two central universities, but there was nothing as such for schools and also for the language. Thus, there was a big void in the schooling space in terms of quality education in Assamese and it was at this stage that the first *Jatiya Bidyalay* (literally, a school for the *jati*, a private school in Assamese medium) was established in the city of Guwahati that attempted to fill some of the gaps that existed. Some individuals, belonging to the middle classes, got together in an attempt to promote education in the mother tongue (Assamese). Ironically, the first *Jatiya Bidyalay* started in the year 1994, the same year that saw the establishment of the IIT and the two central universities in Assam. Although the institutions for higher education were established by an Act of Parliament, these schools were started privately. While it is true that many sections of the middle class did shift to English schools, not all did. It can be fairly said that the upper fractions of the middle-class more or less moved towards English schools, but other

[9] ULFA was formed in 1979. It was an insurgent outfit and its goal was a sovereign Assam.

sections of the middle class continued with the government schools but some even moved to private schools in Assamese medium that came up in the state. The different kinds of such schools will be discussed in the next chapter. The *Jatiya Bidyalays* are one type of such private schools in Assamese medium. Private schools in Assamese medium have grown over the years and at present, they occupy an important place in the overall education scenario of the state.

2.11 Conclusion

The long foregoing discussion has attempted to show that private schools in Assam have a long history. Starting from colonial times, from the very beginning the politics of language was entwined with private schools. Missionaries set up many private schools in Assamese and championed the cause of the language. In this endeavour, they were assisted by the newly emerging middle class. Monolingual ideas of language that came with the colonisers and their subsequent language policies led to the emergence of a language-based community in Assam that was engendered in a dialectical process with the Bengali community. The colonial state's policy of encouraging private schools was also instrumental in many such schools coming up. Although many schools were set up by individuals in the hope of getting aid from the government, they contributed to the overall spread of education in the region. The post-independence period saw the same monolingual ideas dictating language politics in the state. There were also changes in the field of education with many private schools coming up, many of them in English medium. But there were many who had sentiments for their 'mother-tongue' and established private schools to promote mother-tongue education, thus following the same legacy that was in place for the last 200 years. The argument of the chapter is that legacy of the colonial period is still present, be it the monolingual ideas of language, or setting up private schools to promote mother-tongue education and it is in this context that one has to locate the *Jatiya Bidyalays* that emerged from the 90s.