CHAPTER 3

The Assamese private school market: *Jatiya Bidyalaya network*

3.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter provided a historical backdrop of private schools and language politics in Assam, this chapter is concerned with the private school market in Assamese with a focus on one type of such school known as *Jatiya Bidyalays*. The chapter begins by looking at some data on schools and then discusses the trajectory of these schools. Assam is predominantly a rural state, with the majority of the population, 85.9% residing in rural areas and only 14.1% living in the cities, as per the Census 2011. The language break-up of the state as per the Census 2011 is that 48.37% are Assamese speakers, 28.91% Bengali speakers, 4.53% are Bodo speakers, 6.73% are Hindi speakers, 1.91% are Nepali speakers, 0.53% are Manipuri speakers, 0.68% are Santhali speakers, 0.70% are Odia speakers and 7.6% are speakers of numerous other languages. The religious break-up of the population as per the Census 2011 is 61.47% are Hindus, 34.22% are Muslims, 3.74% are Christians, 0.07% are Sikhs, 0.18% are Buddhists, 0.08% are Jains and the rest are of other religious groups or no particular religion. All this has a bearing on schools and enrolment numbers.

3.2 The contemporary school market in Assam

In order to examine the schools in Assam, secondary data from the UDISE+ data sharing website of the Department of School education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India, was requested and downloaded. The data is for the academic year 2018-19. The micro-level data was available and it was further compiled as per the research questions. Some other readily available reports from UDISE+ portal such as the state level school report cards were also referred to. The UDISE data is quite precise and comprehensive and is very useful for examining the categories of gender, caste and religion. However, the category of social ‘class’, be it occupational or income, which is of utmost sociological importance is mentioned only vaguely in these reports. Except the Below Poverty Line (BPL) data, no other data is available. Thus, this limitation of the

missing link between occupational class and educational enrolment is obvious. Here, only secondary data is referred to.

Just like in other parts of India, private schools have also grown here. The state report cards of UDISE+ show that private schools were just 700 in number in the year 2002-03 which increased to more than fifteen thousand in the year 18-19. This includes private unaided schools, government aided schools and unrecognised schools. For the entire state, for the year 18-19, there were 66324 schools and the enrolment was 7454002, i.e., around 74 lakh students are enrolled in roughly about 66 thousand schools. The sector-wise break-up of these schools is 62373 schools in rural areas and only 3951 schools are in urban areas. The corresponding enrolment numbers are 6419561 and 1034441 in rural and urban respectively.

Sector	No of schools	Enrol	%School	% Enrol
Rural (R)	62373	6419561	94.04	86.12
Urb(U)	3951	1034441	5.96	13.88
R+U	66324	7454002	100	100

Table 3.1: No of schools and enrolment of students (rural-urban) in Assam for the year 2018-19 (Source: compiled manually from UDISE+ report)

As seen from the above table (Table 3.1), there is a sharp contrast between rural and urban areas of Assam; 94 % of schools are in the rural sector while only around 6% of schools are in the urban sector but in terms of enrolment it is around 86% and almost 14% respectively which corresponds to the population distribution in the state. While this table gives an idea of the contrast between rural and urban areas, if the data is viewed through the lens of management, then we get a fair understanding of the enrolment of students in private schools in terms of rural and urban areas.

Type	No of schools						Enrolment					
	R	%	U	%	R+U	%	R	%	U	%	R+U	%
DoE	44461	71.28	2165	54.8	46626	70.3	4451261	69.34	485919	46.97	4937180	66.24
Gvt A	4857	7.79	208	5.26	5065	7.64	431205	6.72	27677	2.68	458882	6.16
Pvt U	**4759**	**7.63**	**1325**	**33.54**	**6084**	**9.17**	**1049832**	**16.35**	**470941**	**45.53**	**1520773**	**20.4**
Unrec	7577	12.15	196	4.96	7773	11.72	381478	5.94	18357	1.77	399835	5.36
Others	719	1.16	57	1.45	776	1.16	105785	1.66	31547	3.05	137332	1.84
Total	62373	100	3951	100	66324	100	6419561	100	1034441	100	7454002	100

Table 3.2: Schools by management type and their numbers and enrolment for the year 2018-19 (Source: compiled manually from UDISE+ reports)

The table above (Table 3.2) shows the number of schools by management type in rural and urban areas and their corresponding enrolment numbers. For simplicity, various categories of schools are clubbed under the heading of 'Others'. As can be seen, for private unaided schools (recognised), the percentage number of schools in rural areas is only 7.63% but in urban areas, it is 33.54%, while the enrolment percentages are 16.35% and 45.53% respectively. Overall, in the entire state, the enrolment in private unaided schools is 20.40% and if the govt. aided schools and unrecognised schools are combined then the enrolment percentage in all these schools that are of private nature comes to 31.92% which is quite significant.

When it comes to the medium of instruction of schools, multiple languages are offered as a medium of instruction by different schools of various management types. These include Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, English, Hindi and many more. From the data (Table 3.3), it is seen that out of all the schools, be it government or private, the regional languages constitute the majority of the schools as medium of instruction: Assamese (74.08%), Bengali (13.69%), Bodo (4.43%), and Others (0.78%) while English medium schools are just 6.08% of all schools.

Medium	No of schools			Enrolment		
	%R	%U	%R+U	%R	%U	%R+U
Assamese	75.13	57.56	74.08	76.8	51.62	73.31
Bengali	13.74	12.88	13.69	11.65	9.08	11.29
Bodo	4.64	0.96	4.43	2.26	0.38	2
English	5.06	22.2	6.08	8.39	35.18	12.11
Hindi	0.51	5.87	0.82	0.49	3.61	0.93
Sanskrit	0.11	0.25	0.12	0.06	0.07	0.06
Others	0.81	0.28	0.78	0.36	0.06	0.32
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100.00

Table 3.3: The school and enrolment percentages in terms of medium of instruction (Source: UDISE+ reports)

Here, it must be noted that Bengali is the official language in the Barak valley (comprising the three districts of *Cachar, Hailakandi* and *Karimganj*) owing to Shastri formula mentioned in chapter two that was enforced after the official state language agitation of 1960. The majority of the Bengali medium schools are found there, although

there are some Bengali medium schools in other parts as well. Bodo is the official language in the Bodoland Autonomous Region (BTR), also a co-official language of the state and Bodo medium schools are generally found in those areas, although not confined just to them. Other languages include languages such as Garo, Mizo, Manipuri, Mising and other tribal languages.

In terms of enrolment for the entire state, Assamese medium schools are at 73.31%, Bengali at 11.29%, Bodo at 2%, Others at 0.32% and English at 12.11%. It is obvious that the majority of the enrolment is in the regional languages, with English medium enrolment at just 12.11% (9 lakh students out of total of 74 lakh). English medium enrolment therefore is very low in Assam. But still, the enrolment in English medium schools is more than double the number of schools available, suggesting that there is a strong demand as compared to the supply of English medium education.

This picture is for the entire state but sharp contrasts exist between the rural and urban sectors. In rural Assam, the number of Assamese medium schools is 75.13% and their enrolment is 76.80%, suggesting more enrolment than the existing number of schools. But in urban Assam, the number of such schools is 57.56% but enrolment is 51.62%, suggesting significantly lesser enrolment. This shows that the demand for Assamese medium education is quite strong in rural Assam but less so in urban Assam. However, more than 50% (more than 5 lakh) of students are still enrolled in an Assamese medium school in urban Assam which is also not a small number. For English medium schools, in rural Assam, the number of schools is 5.06% but the enrolment is 8.39% and in urban Assam, the number of schools is 22.20% and the enrolment is at 35.18% (more than 3.5 lakh), thereby showing strong demand for English education in both rural and urban areas. It is also possible that many of the English medium schools have better infrastructure compared to others and the number of enrolments per school is more and hence the overall enrolment numbers are much higher than the number of schools. From strictly looking at the scenario from the lens of the market which operates on the principle of demand and supply, it can be said that there is ample scope for more English medium schools to come up and meet the demand for English education.

But the question here is what is the management type of the English medium schools? In the case of Assam, when we look at the private unaided schools with the lens of medium of instruction, as the table below (Table 3.4) shows, out of the total of 6084 schools, which is 9.17% of all schools in the state, around 56.85% are in Assamese medium while 32.53% are in English medium. Overall, therefore, private unaided Assamese medium schools are much more than English medium schools. This would go against the commonsense idea that private unaided schools are generally of English medium. However, in terms of overall enrolment, the numbers are more or less at par, with English medium at almost 7 lakhs (45.14%) compared to Assamese medium at slightly more than 7 lakhs (48.80%).

Med	Rural (R)		Urban (U)		R+U	
	%No	% Enr	%No	% Enr	%No	% Enr
As	60.6	55.73	43.4	33.37	56.85	48.8
Be	9.04	5.02	1.96	1.5	7.5	3.93
Hi	0.32	0.19	1.43	0.8	0.56	0.38
Sans	0.53	0.13	0.15	0.03	0.44	0.1
Eng	27.09	36.75	52.08	63.84	32.53	45.14
Bo	2.44	2.18	0.98	0.47	2.12	1.65
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100 .00

Table 3.4: Private unaided schools and their medium of instruction for the year 2018-19 (Source: compiled manually using UDISE+ reports)

But, despite that, the difference between rural and urban contexts is quite pronounced. In rural areas, English medium schools are 27.09% but in urban areas, this number is 52.08%, while Assamese medium schools are 60.60% in rural and 43.40% in urban. In urban Assam, the number of English medium (690) schools is more than Assam medium (575) schools. Enrolment wise as well, in urban areas, out of all students enrolled in private unaided schools, 63.84% are in English medium while 33.37% are in Assamese medium. Thus, the preference for private unaided English medium schools is more pronounced in the urban context. As mentioned in the first chapter, in the case of Guwahati, the biggest urban centre in Assam, this ratio is even more skewed.

This data shows that although there is a strong preference for private unaided English schools, particularly in urban Assam, the demand for such Assamese medium schools is also no less. In fact, for the overall state, it is slightly more, although overall the enrolment percentage of 48.80% is lesser than the number of schools at 56.85%. It can be argued on the basis of this data that the preference for private schools is not only just because of an English medium of instruction as some studies seem to argue, at least in the context of Assam. The preference seems to be more for private management. The medium of instruction might not be the only determinant cause in such cases; rather private management is what might be the actual cause, combined with other factors.

The data shows that the private school market is a large market in Assam but when seen in terms of language, there are multiple markets within this field. Here, private schools in English medium form a large portion of it. This field consists of many well-known and reputed brands of schools that are generally affiliated with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), other reputed schools affiliated with the State Board, called the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) and also lesser-known small schools of the low fees type that are also affiliated with SEBA. Similarly, there are private schools in Bengali medium, Bodo medium, Hindi medium, and even Sanskrit medium but their numbers are less. However, the enrolment numbers show that it is the private schools in Assamese medium that is the largest market within the private schools. We now come to case of the *Jatiya Bidyalays* in Assam. But before that, a brief mention of the BPL category and their preference for schools from this data. It is seen that even amongst the BPL category which comprises 31.98% of the total population[10], there is some enrolment in the private unaided schools and also the unrecognised schools but even here, it is mostly in the regional mediums and not in English.

3.3 Private schools in Assamese medium - *the Jatiya Bidyalayas*

As shown from the data above, when we look at the private school market, in terms of enrolment, 7,42,190 (48.80%) students are enrolled in 3459 private Assamese medium schools (recognised). This field, in terms of enrolment, which is almost half the size of

[10] Source: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-has-highest-number-of-bpl-people-in-ne/articleshow/22619440.cms

the entire private school market (recognised) in Assam comprises several types of private schools and a couple of big players. The first major group of schools is called *Sankardev Sishu Niketans* (SSN) (Vidya Bharti schools), affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). These schools are found all over the state and they generally use Assamese as a medium of instruction in the Brahmaputra valley but in the Barak valley districts, they use Bengali as a medium of instruction. The Vidya Bharti schools' genesis started much earlier than the 90s and the first school was established in the heart of Guwahati city in 1979 (Bhuyan and Goswami, 2021). They have grown considerably over the years, possibly much more rapidly after the 90s. At present, there are around 589 schools in the state. These schools have their own ideological goals of Hindutva and are financially supported by the RSS. Although these are non-government schools and private in nature, they are not completely dependent on market principles for their survival. The tacit support of the current government and also financial assistance that they receive from RSS make these schools somewhat immune from market fluctuations. The other major but relatively loose network of schools are called *Jatiya Bidylayas* (JB). These schools are independent private schools that completely function in accordance with the logic of the market. The JBs started their journey from 1994 onwards when the first school, called the *Assam Jatiya Bidyalaya* (AJB) was established in Guwahati. Although there are no official figures, presently there are roughly around 1500 such schools in the state. There are other independent schools that are not associated with these two types and their numbers are also not quite small. Out of the 3459 schools in this field (i.e. private Assamese schools), around 1500 schools are JBs, around 500 are SSNs and the rest are other independent schools. In terms of enrolment, approximately 2.5-3 lac students are enrolled in the JBs, around 2-2.5 lacs are enrolled in the SSNs and the rest of the enrolment is in other schools.

It is the JBs and the other private schools that function usually as per market logic that are dependent on the students' fees for or their survival. They compete with other schools for students and try to survive. But the question is how did this market emerge in the first place? The theory of 'markets as fields' suggests that new markets emerge in close proximity to existing ones and the transformation of existing markets results from exogenous forces, economic crisis, invasion, political intervention by states etc (Fligstein,

2001). The Assamese private school market grew along with the private school market in English medium due to the economic and political changes ushered in by the government.

3.4 The *Jatiya Bidyalay* movement in Assam

The *Jatiya Bidyalayas* are private co-educational schools in Assam that offer education in the Assamese medium. They provide schooling from the pre-primary levels to secondary levels, are affiliated with the state board, Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) and do not receive any government aid. These schools are found throughout the state except for the four districts of *Cachar*, *Hailakandi, Karimganj* and *Dima Hasao* out of the thirty-three districts in Assam (three of these districts are in the Barak Valley where the official language is Bengali and not Assamese and the hill district of *Dima Hasao*, previously known as North Cachar district is also inhabited by non-Assamese speaking tribal population. These schools are found in both rural and urban areas and over the years have come to occupy an important place in the vernacular medium educational space in the state. These are secular schools. Students from diverse backgrounds attend these schools and are not confined to just the Assamese-speaking crowd. Majority of such schools are low-cost or "budget" schools. Apart from a few schools (and this includes the first *Jatiya Bidylay*) where students from middle classes or even well-to-do backgrounds attend, the majority of the schools cater to lower middle classes or even poor backgrounds.

3.4.1 The beginning: *Assam Jatiya Bidyalay*

The journey of the JBs started with the establishment of the *Assam Jatiya Bidyalaya* (AJB) and the commencement of classes on 1st January 1994. The school was set up by some individuals after a prolonged effort, with each of them contributing in their own capacity. The individuals who were involved in the initial development of the school were all influenced by the Assam Movement (1979-85), although none of them were actively involved in the movement. At that time, there were few private Assamese medium schools, mostly set up by individuals in the hope of getting provincialized, in the state and the state-run government schools were in bad shape. New private English medium schools were coming up and a new market was emerging. These private English

medium schools were the only option for a so-called good education but some of them, particularly convent schools, were also notorious for humiliating students for speaking in the local tongue. This treatment meted out to the Assamese language was taken as a personal insult by some. Sanjeev Sabhapandit, one of the founding members of the school writes in one of the local journals how in trying to find a good school for his own daughter, such incidents made him opt against an English medium school (Sabhapandit, 2019, p. 48). Instead, he decided to start his own school. Sabhapandit was the chairman of Assam Polyester Limited (APOL), a state public-sector enterprise. His decision to start an Assamese medium school brought him in contact with others who also had such ideas at the time, such as Dr. Narayan Sharma, a paediatrician. Others included Basanta Deka, educationist and present convenor of a regional political party called Assam Jatiya Parishad, academics like Sachin Kakoti, former IIT professor, Makhan Lal Das, former professor of Assam Engineering College, Kuladhar Saikia, former Assam Sahitya Sabha President and former Director General of Police and others (ibid, p. 48-49). All these men, mostly from upper castes and middle-class backgrounds had similar ideas at the time and it would be unfair to credit just one person as the founder of the school. It's a different matter that they had their differences and most of them are not associated with the school anymore. They were heavily influenced by the Asam Movement and they had strong sentiments. They got together, and after many initial challenges, the school got off to a start. Personal and political reasons, thus, played a part in setting up the school. It was decided that earnings generated through a company called Shangrila Quest Private Limited, which the owners set up, school expenditure would be made. The school thus functioned as a private enterprise.

It is not like the school simply functioned as a private entity in a pure market. The school received ample community support. Using their social capital, the founders were able to get land from the Indian railways which donated land for the school. Civil society organisations like The All-Assam Students Association (AASU)[11] that played a decisive role in the Medium of Instruction movement (1972) and the Assam Movement (1979),

[11] It must be noted that Dr. Sammujjal Bhattacharjee, former AASU president who is well known in the entire state is a regular visitor to the AJB, even today.

made donations in the form of computers and former Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh who was an elected Rajya Sabha member from Guwahati, Assam, donated money. Various others have also contributed in their own ways. The school in a sense benefited from these contributions or donations that were made in the name of the Assamese community. The school came to symbolise the Assamese *jati* (Kalita, 2018).

From the very beginning, the school promoted the idea that the mother tongue (in this case Assamese) is the best medium of instruction for students. The AJB mentions on its website, "Education through vernacular medium is the essence of AJB established on 01 January 1994. It is scientifically established that the mother tongue is the best medium of instruction to develop the personality of the students in the school level. This conviction led to the establishment of the school. Assamese is a rich language to express thoughts and ideas. The medium is capable of enriching the students to keep pace with the outer world" (assamjatiyabidyalay.com). At the same time, however, English was also given importance, given the prevailing situation at the time. In fact, 'Spoken English' classes were made compulsory in the school (Sabhapandit, 2019). The founders wanted to take this forward and they provided the initial push and leadership. They realised the void that existed in the vernacular medium educational space since government schools were not performing well. There was a demand for Assamese medium schooling but good quality Assamese medium schools were scarce, or non-existent. So, in 1995, one year after the first school began, the founders put an advertisement in the newspaper for a meeting inviting individuals who would be interested in setting up *Jatiya Bidyalays* in their own localities (Deka, 2018). The founders would guide them in terms of textbooks, teacher training and so on. Many individuals turned up, inspired by the cause for the Assamese language and education in the mother-tongue. They later went on to start their own schools under the name of *Jatiya Bidyalays* in different parts of the state in their own private capacity. The fact that there was serious unemployment at the time and these schools provided a good source of entrepreneurship for these individuals also played a part. This was the beginning of the spread of *Jatiya Bidyalays* and over the next decades, hundreds of such JBs came up in every nook and corner of the state. In the regional literature, this phenomenon has been referred to as some kind of a movement (Deka, 2018; Kalita, 2018). Most of the schools that came up in the late 90s and early 2000s

were committed to the cause of the language, although the later ones may or may not be so committed. Since the majority of these were small schools, they had limited resources. But despite that, they did play, maybe a small, but still an important part in championing the cause of the Assamese language.

The 'movement' resulted in the emergence of a new market where now the service exchanged was 'education in mother-tongue'. This market is a stable market since the product being exchanged has legitimacy and there is high demand for it. The migration of students from state government schools to private schools has ensured that the demand for this service is high. The spread of these schools and their relative success brought in new players, many of whom started their own schools but without using the brand of *Jatiya Bidyalays*. As seen earlier from the data, these schools are also more than a thousand in number.

The role of the middle class deserves a mention here. As described earlier, most of the founders were from upper-caste and middle-class backgrounds and therefore had access to capital – economic, symbolic as well as cultural. The small entrepreneurs that contributed to the spread of these schools by taking the initiative and setting up schools in their private capacity also belonged to the educated middle class. They might not have been from the elite sections but they also had some access to capital, both economic and cultural. Thus, the middle classes simply didn't abandon government schools and went to private schools due to the lure of the symbolic capital of English. It was not as linear as it is made out to be. There were also those who resisted these developments and tried to chart out their own paths. This does not mean they opposed English education. They only attempted to help Assamese education in their limited capacity.

Image 1 below shows the celebration of the *jatiya utsav* (national festival) Rongali Bihu in the year 2022 in the school premises of the AJB. Since the school was meant to champion the cause of the Assamese *jati* (community/nationality), the school celebrates all the culture, customs and heroes of Assam in all its glory including the national festivals like the one shown above. The picture has been deliberately taken from the website to highlight the fact that they do have an active online presence. A private school

that operates under market conditions is bound to promote itself as far as possible. The picture also shows that it is a relatively large school, has a multi-storeyed building and there is ample space as a playground. This is unlike most other JBs that are small schools. Also, the buses in the background show the city-wide presence of the school. Students from all corners of Guwahati study in the AJB. Some well-known regionalist leaders and politicians are known to have sent their children to AJB. Since many of these politicians are also very affluent, it would be fair to say that few individuals from elite upper middle-class backgrounds also send their children to this school.

Image 1: The celebration of the *jatiya utsav* (national festival) Rongali Bihu at Assam Jatiya Bidyalay in 2022. Sources and picture credit: AJB website. Pic credits: Binoy Bikash Gogoi (used with permission)

3.5 *Jatiya Bidyalays* as a network

At present, there are more than 1500 *Jatiya Bidyalays* all over the state of Assam. The field of the JBs, however, is not uniform but fragmented. AJB was the first one and under their guidance and training, many schools came up. What is interesting to note is the naming of these schools. A brief overview of these schools reveals a wide variety of

naming patterns. Some use the national heroes and add *Jatiya Bidyalay* to it. For example, *Shankardev Jatiya Bidyalay, Chilarai Jatiya Bidyalay, Lakshminath Bezbaruah Jatiya Bidyalay, Rupkonwar Jatiya Bidyalay* etc. Some just use the location of the town or the neighbourhood and add *Jatiya Bidyalay* to it. For example, *Noonmati Jatiya Bidyalay, Jorhat Jatiya Bidyalay, Sibsagar Jatiya Bidyalay, Anchalik Jatiya Bidyalay*. Some others are more neutral and use words like Adarsha (ideal), Gyandeep (light of knowledge) and add *Jatiya Bidyalay* to it. Some even use English words that might even seem a bit ridiculous like *Dolphin Jatiya Bidyalay, Moonlight Jatiya Bidyalay* etc. Many others use the proprietor's name and add *Jatiya Bidyalay* to it. Many such schools have come up in the Muslim dominated areas and, in these areas, one sees names of important Muslim individuals in the school names, for example, *Azan Pir Jatiya Bidyalay*, *Motiur Rahman Jatiya Bidyalay*, *Al-Amin Jatiya Bidyalay* etc. Some others try to show the linkages between the Assamese and the Muslims like *Shankar-Azan Jatiya Bidylay* etc. What is common to all these schools is that they the word *Jatiya Bidyalay* in the school's name and use Assamese as a medium of instruction. And of course, all of them are private schools. But at the same time, they don't have any centralised governing body.

The AJB possesses the economic and technological capital; it has the printing facility and it has collaborated with numerous individuals to design its own curriculum. These individuals are mostly academics who work in various colleges and even universities across the state. This curriculum, rooted in Assamese nationalist sentiments, is followed by all the other schools that are part of their network of schools. This network of schools which number many hundreds (almost a thousand as per AJB) abide by the rules and regulations set by the AJB. The AJB plays the role of a big brother and encourages new schools and it takes them under their wing. They have a management committee and an Education Council called Assam Jatiya Bidyalaya Education Council (AJBEC). AJBEC gives certification to other small schools that agree to follow their curriculum and their other rules and regulations. This certification by the council helps the schools to get credibility. AJB has a reputation and there is strong demand among students which it is not able to meet and hence the admission of students takes every year through a lottery. Because of its reputation, the infrastructure set up, its monopoly in designing textbooks, it can rightly be called the incumbent. The AJB is a dominant player in the field and

encourages other schools to play by their rules. It is not uncommon to hear from people who are associated with the field of private schools that the AJB is the only Assamese medium school that can give competition to the other elite private English medium schools. The school, however, had its own internal power struggle after the initial set up where many of the founding members left the school due to differences. But compared to the AJB, the majority of the other JBs that are associated with this school are generally small schools, low-fee private schools. While these are one set of schools, there are other schools also called *Jatiya Bidyalays*, example *abc Jatiya Bidyalaya* etc, that refuse to abide by the norms of the AJB and function independently. Many of them have formed their networks and some of them have even designed their own textbooks. For example, one set of such schools in Jorhat numbering 70-80 function like a cooperative with their own textbooks. But even these schools were initially associated with the AJB. But ideological differences and the mechanisms through which business was conducted by the AJB with these schools led to some of them parting ways. This set of schools somehow has managed to design their textbooks. But textbook and curriculum designing is not an easy job. So, we find other kinds of schools that have their own trusts and function independently but when it comes to the curriculum, they follow the AJB. These schools do not follow any other rules set up by the AJB but due to their inability to design textbooks are dependent on the AJB. Still, there are others who don't follow the AJB at all but follow their textbooks only partially. In these schools, the school principals decide the syllabus and for some books, they take AJB books and for others, they refer to state board or even central board books (in case of English textbooks etc).

These were schools in terms of the curriculum but the schools can also be looked at in terms of management - are they committee-based or is it a one-man show. Many of the schools are committee based, especially for slightly bigger and larger schools. But there can be instances where there are committees that manage the functioning of even small schools. At the same time, many of the schools are run just by one person- the owner who generally is the school principal. These schools are more like family-run schools where it is one person who sets all the rules and regulations. Since the majority of the schools are small schools, many of them function like this. In terms of infrastructure, only a few schools like the AJB have adequate infrastructure, a five-storey building, sports facilities

and its own transportation facilities. The majority of the others are small schools. In terms of fees, the schools are mostly low fees. None of the schools can be called high fees schools. Even AJB's fees of rupees 1400-1600 per month and admission of rupees 12500-14500 per year nowhere comes close to elite English medium schools which can go into lakhs per annum.

The presence of different kinds of JBs shows that this field is a fragmented one. There is certainly one dominant player, or the incumbent, the AJB. Others can be called challengers. Some schools have sought to challenge the incumbent by means of forming their own networks where they have decided on a new curriculum but they have been confined largely to their own small localities. The AJB's network is on a pan-Assam level. As we know, a stable 'market as field' means that the main players in a given market are able to reproduce their firms on a period-to-period basis (Fligstein, 2001, p. 17). The AJB and many others have been able to do that.

3.6 Conceptions of control in the market

All the JBs operate as per market logic, i.e. they survive on the basis of their ability to get students. Markets provide actors with cognitive frames to interpret the actions of other organisations and they also prescribe how the competition will work in a given market (Fligstein, 2001, p.18). These can be called conceptions of control which are specific rules that govern relations between suppliers (firms, or rather schools in this case), workers and customers (ibid, p. 27). Conceptions of control are therefore market-specific agreements between firms, tactics for cooperation and competition and status ordering of firms in a given market (ibid, p. 35). They are also historically specific to a certain industry in a certain society (ibid). The AJB by virtue of its dominant position in this field has been able to set the rules. Also, they are able to produce the dominant cultural meanings for the market. Most of the other smaller schools are dependent on the AJB, especially for textbooks and therefore abide by the rules set up by them. The AJBEC 2019 guidelines handbook gives in elaborate detail the norms to be followed by all other schools that seek affiliation with AJB. Schools are now encouraged to get themselves registered with AJBEC for which a registration number will be provided. Rule no 2 of the

handbook specifically mentions that only those schools that follow AJBEC's rules and regulations completely can use the phrase 'established as per norms of AJBEC' on their signboards or writing pads. If they are registered, they can use the registration number as well. Rule no 13 mentions that new schools can be established only as private entities. Through means of a Limited company, Trust, Managing Committee etc, the schools are encouraged to be managed and run. Rule no 25 mentions that for teacher appointment, first there has to be a written test followed by an oral interview. This rule, as will be seen in Chapter 5, is not necessarily followed by many of the smaller schools that are short on teachers. Rule no 26 mentions the minimum qualification for a teacher to be appointed - an Assamese medium education during schooling, at least 50% marks in 10th, 12th degree levels, (if these are not met, then it can be relaxed) and if a teacher is appointed, s/he must enrol their kids in an Assamese medium school. In some of the advertisements for teacher posts by AJB, this last point is mentioned as 'Son/daughter (s) of the candidate (s), if any, must take education in Assamese medium at school level if he/she is appointed in AJB.' These are some of the rules but there are numerous others. Apart from these, there are established procedures to procure textbooks etc. All these are set by the AJB. Sometimes there are negative sanctions that are also used to enforce the norms set by them. For example, many small schools have come up that have no connection whatsoever with the AJB but they claim that they follow the AJB norms to claim credibility. The AJB which is aware of such developments has decided to come up with a list of schools that function as per their rules and publish such lists publicly in the newspaper and in their website. However, the schools that claim to follow the norms but don't follow in actual practice won't be listed in these lists (AJBEC 2019). The point of all of this is to highlight that there are well-established rules that govern relations between various schools within this field and the market therefore is a very stable market at present. Of course, not all schools abide by the rules and even if some claim to do so, actually don't but nonetheless, the conceptions of control are in place.

3.7 Reasons for spread of the *Jatiya Bidyalays*

The important question is why did the market spread? What are the main contributing factors for the spread? Neoliberal ideas combined with identity politics (linguistic

nationalism) were instrumental in the spread of these schools. Similar arguments have been made with respect to the concomitant rise of Hindu nationalism and consumption cultures based on Hindu identity (Sriprakash and Possamai, 2011).

Neoliberal ideology would explain why the private nature of the schools worked while the identity politics part would explain why schools in the Assamese medium clicked. The circumstances of the 80s and 90s have been deliberated in the previous sections. The political atmosphere, where there was a deep sense of identity crisis, as well as the state of education at the time, all played their part. The Assam Movement left its mark on the state. Highlighting the importance of the Assam Movement on why the schools worked out and found acceptability, Dr. Devavrat Sharma, a well-known scholar of the region and also associated with *Jatiya Bidyalay* (his wife is the principal of one such school called *LKM Jatiya Bidyalaya* and as such he is closely associated with the running of the school), says,

> "*Jatiya Bidyalays* worked out because there was an emptiness, a void after the Assam *Andolan*. *Assam Andolan* had no tangible outcome, no product for the Assamese per say. The outcomes like Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IITG) has nothing specifically for the Assamese, *Sankardev Kalakhetra* is an open space for music and dance, nothing much as such, Tezpur University, where an Assamese department has started only recently. So, *Assam Andolan* has no product where we can see the Assamese nationalist ideas in a complete form. Therefore, there was a void and from within that void, the emptiness, the Assamese community accepted the *Jatiya Bidyalays* as a symbol of that nationalist thinking". (translation mine)

What Dr. Sharma stresses here is that the Assamese community got nothing out of the Assam movement. There was nothing for the Assamese language or the community. Therefore, when the AJB and other JBs were established, they received widespread support from the common public.

It would be very unfair, however, to attribute the spread of these schools just to nationalist sentiments. Yes, there were insecurities around language but it is to the credit

of some of the individuals who managed to make the school a success which inspired many others. National sentiments also cannot provide a sufficient condition for the sustainability of these schools. These are after all educational institutions and people judge them as so. Therefore, the learning outcomes matter considerably. Good learning outcomes of some of the schools and the scope for educational entrepreneurship facilitated the spread of these schools.

As years passed on and students from AJB managed to get state rankings in the matriculation exam year after year the confidence in these schools increased all the more. It's not like Assamese medium students didn't get state positions earlier. Some government schools had good results and that included rank holders. But to see a private Assamese medium school do well or even better than other reputed private English medium schools in the region was a matter of pride for many. Some other JBs over the years have also managed to secure state positions and this has further helped the cause of these schools. Overall, every year, generally a number of students from JBs all over the state secure state rankings.

Nationalist sentiments and good academic performance aside, the economics of the schools have also played a part. James Tooley (2009) in his work on low-cost private schools in Hyderabad has highlighted how some of the schools are profitable. Similarly, many of these JBs, if not all, are quite profitable, at least for the owner. So, this has provided an opportunity for many individuals to start their own schools as a means of livelihood. Assam after all, is not an industrial state; it is primarily an agricultural state. After the de-regulation of the economy in the 90s, people took educational entrepreneurship as a means of benefiting from the economic boom and some of it, maybe a small percentage, came over to these JBs as well. That entrepreneurship in the education sector in Assam is significant can be seen from the fact that numerous English medium schools and other educational institutes came up in the state due to individual efforts. One could say that there was some kind of neo-liberal logic of private profits somewhere at play, and it spilled over to the JBs as well. The structural changes that happened in the Indian economy in the 90s actually facilitated the spread of such schools. Without a liberalised economy, there is no way this could have become some kind of a

movement. At best, there could have been one school or a few. In the case of the JBs, conservative ideas of sentiments for language, good academic performance of some of the schools and the neo-liberal logic of private profits, all these factors have contributed to the initial growth, acceptability and sustainability of the schools over the last three decades.

3.8 Changing nature of politics and role of the state

The neo-liberal economics of the 90s which led to transition of a state controlled socialist economy to a more liberalised economy profoundly changed the nature of politics (in general) in the Indian nation-state. In this new economic setup, there was more reliance on market forces, via supply-side policies, which meant a reduction of the socio-economic role of the state and individual initiative in the private sector was expected to fulfil this role more effectively (Rajagopal, 1994, p. 1659). This reduction in the role of the state had a cascading effect and it affected the politics of be it caste, religion, ethnicity and so on. The emphasis on 'individual' and 'private' meant less demands to the state and more dependence on the market. In the context of language politics, in earlier times, there were usually linguistic demands made to the state for the safeguarding or promotion of any language. This involved mobilisations and movements around standardisation, purification, script, medium of instruction in schools, official recognition of languages and so on. But in the post 90s India, what was seen was more private participation and apart from demands being made to the state, individuals in their private capacity also made efforts to safeguard the language.

Madan, Sastry and Ramdas's (2019) work on Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) and their Vidodaya school shows how private participation can lead to educational change in the form of social movements and how community sentiments might lead some to safeguard their language in the form of a school (that teaches and has books in their own language). In this case, the AMS took over a private school and used the school for furthering the cause of the Adivasi identity and so on. The important point to note, however, is that this was done in their private capacity rather than any demands being made to the state. The JB *andolon* (movement) in Assam is similar but it happened on a much larger scale.

While the Vidodaya school was just one school, the JBs are numbered more than a thousand. The case of the JBs in Assam shows the changing nature of politics in the country. Rather than being passive recipients of the state, actors relied more on market forces to achieve their goals.

The state is complicit in market building and helps stabilise the market by formulating rules and regulations. Ball (2007) describes in the context of the UK how the welfare state is being steadily delegitimized and subject to systematic but not total dismantling and is in the process of being replaced or in part overlaid by what he calls the competitive state. He further claims that one of the aspects of the competition state is a shift from the state as a de-commodifying agent to the re-emergence of the state as a commodifying agent that is repositioning the state as commissioner and monitor of public services, and broker of social and economic innovations rather than deliverer or even owner and funder (Ball, 2007, p. 3). 'The competition state aims to secure economic growth by promoting the economic and extra economic conditions necessary for competitive success' (ibid). In the case of India and particularly in Assam, the JBs spread owing to the perception of failure of the state to provide quality education in the regional languages.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, by looking at markets as fields, the private school market in Assamese medium is examined. Using data, this market is precisely located. How this market emerged, how it attained stability and why it spread is looked into. The main argument of this chapter is that the nature of politics has changed and the manifestations of this change can be observed in the emergence of a new market and the market dynamics of private schools in Assam. The state is complicit in market building. As we saw, the majority of the spread of this new school market was led by small schools. In the next chapter, one small *Jatiya Bidyalay* is taken as a case study and the practices inside the school are looked at. The role played by the schools in promoting certain ideologies is examined. While this chapter provides a bird's eye view of the schools, the next three chapters provide a worm's eye view from the ground, from one particular school.