

CHAPTER 4

The field setting: a small low fee *Jatiya Bidyalay*

4.1 Introduction

The majority of the *Jatiya Bidyalays* (JB) are small schools. As discussed previously in chapter one, we need to know in greater detail about the nature and functioning of small scale low-fee private schools and to understand them by referring to their local context. It was mentioned that the beginning of the first school was linked with sentiments for Assamese language. This chapter introduces one school, a small JB and examines the everyday activities to make sense of the ideological constructions of language. In this school, as per the three-language formula, Assamese, English and Hindi are taught and these three languages are examined. Most of the data comes from observations inside the school, especially classrooms where my role was that of a teacher.

4.2 The school – KGFZ *Jatiya Bidyalay*

The school is named KGFZ *Jatiya Bidyalay* (fictionalised name), established in the year 2000-01. It is affiliated to the state board, State Education Board of Assam (SEBA). It is part of the AJB network of schools and follows exactly the same curriculum that is designed by the AJB. The academic calendar is also the same as that of the AJB. The owner of the school is a government officer and the school operates from his residential property. In the two-storey house, the owners live on the 2nd floor while the school operates from the ground and the 1st floor. At that time, the owner's wife was officially the principal of the school but in all practical matters of the school, it was the owner who had the final say. There is a small Saraswati *mandir* (temple) at the entrance near the gate, inside the compound of the house where students used to seek blessings. The school is roughly spread over 2.5 *katha* (1 *katha* = 2880 sq. feet) land out of which the schooling building, i.e. the owner's house must be around 1 *katha*. So, there is some space for a playground (Image 2). This is unlike many small schools where there is absolutely zero space for play activities. There are two toilets outside on the ground floor, one for boys and the other for girls. There is another toilet that is inside the school on the first floor. used by the staff. Classrooms are of small size and can accommodate 20-25 students in

each room. There are marble tiles on the ground floor classrooms but those on the first floor have no tiles, but simple plaster. The daily routine of the school begins with the morning assembly that takes place at 8:45 am inside the school premises. After the prayer, classes start at 9 am. There are six periods in a total of 45 mins each. Lunch break is from 12 pm to 12:30 pm. This is for Monday to Friday. Saturdays are half-days and school gets over at 12 pm. The six periods are dedicated to different subjects but there are no P.T (playtime) classes or computer classes. The school had computer classes in the past but now the computers are all old and unusable.



Image 2: The open space in front of the school building is used for the morning assembly as well as for other events. The small school has very limited space for sports activities. Source and picture credit: self-clicked.

At the time of fieldwork, there were around roughly 150 students and 15 teachers. The principal said before the covid pandemic they had more than 250 students which seems to be true. The UDISE+ school report card shows 161 students as of September 2021. The school is a low-fee budget school with monthly fees ranging from Rs. 350-1500, from pre-nursery to 10th grade. The majority of the students were Assamese Hindus but there

were also some Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims, Nepalis, Bodos etc. Muslim composition was 11% of the entire population. Other linguistic minorities like Bengali, Nepali or Bodo were very few ranging from 1-3%. The caste break-up of the student population was 28% General, 25% SC, 12% ST and 34% OBC. This school catered to mostly lower middle class and poorer classes of students. Although there were some students from middle-class backgrounds, the majority were from lower classes. Only a handful of students (less than 5%) were from a family background that had government jobs (like government school teachers, Forest Department, Public Works Department, Secretariat etc), and most other students (around 40%) had lower-middle class backgrounds that comprised mostly of small businessmen (like grocery shops, other small shops, mobile recharge shops, owner of a garage, supplier of goods, those that earned by rental income), contractors, service in private jobs (like in pharmacy or in showrooms), drivers, part-time priests (who also have small shops), small time cook etc. and the remaining (around 50%) were from the lower classes like E-rikshaw drivers, factory workers, carpenter, daily labourers, cleaning staff in hospitals etc.

As far as the teachers are concerned, the majority of them were forward caste Assamese Hindus. Teacher salaries were low, ranging from 2500 for those with lower qualifications and those who taught in lower grades to 7-8000 for those who taught Maths, Science or English in the higher grades. Out of the fifteen teachers, ten were female and the rest were male. All the male faculty were new and some even left during the course of the fieldwork. There were some new ones among the female teachers as well but most of the female teachers had been associated with the school for many years. In terms of qualification, all the teachers were graduates except two of them who were undergraduates. It must be noted, however, that, compared to the students, the teachers' class profile was higher, as most of these teachers were from middle-class backgrounds. Except for three of the male teachers and one among the female teachers, everyone else had their own residential property¹² in the city. One of the male teachers had ancestral

¹² Here by property means property of the father/husband in case of female teachers and also in case of one of the male teachers.

property in a well-off location in the city and he came to school by car (a hatchback). Other male teachers had their two-wheelers except one who used to travel by bus and stayed on rent. Among the female teachers, only one commuted by a two-wheeler and the rest used public transport. Since the salary was low, to supplement their incomes, most teachers took private tuitions excluding three senior female teachers who were economically well-off (one's husband is a retired government school teacher; one is a widower who gets her husband's pension and one's husband is a businessman) and were not dependent on the school salary for survival. They seemed to take teaching more as a vocation and a means to be engaged rather than for income. Others, however, were dependent on tuitions. At the time of the study, there was no head teacher as such and teacher salaries were as per their experience and the subject taught; the ones who taught in senior grades (Maths, Science, Adv. Maths etc) received relatively higher salaries.



Image 3: Inside view of one of the classrooms of the school in the ground floor. This was not during regular days when mobiles are not allowed but on the occasion of independence-day (15th August). Source and picture credits: self-clicked.

4.3 Language ideologies and schools

Language ideology refers to the situated, partial and interested character of conceptions and use of language (Errington, 2001 as cited in Kroskrity, 2004, p. 496). And schools are important sites and venues for the production and reproduction of language ideologies (Olivio, 2003). Schools are also sites for teaching students about puritan notions of language that are associated with standard language ideology. In a broader sense, they are active agents of primary socialisation of children where transmission of culture takes place. Here, culture refers to the complex whole that consists of norms, values, ideas, knowledge, belief systems, ideologies etc. (Taylor, 1871 as cited in Bierstedt, 1957). In the sociology of education, there are two versions of this process of transmission or reproduction via schools. The functionalist approach associated with Durkheim, Parsons and others states that in order for society to exist, youngsters need training in the values of their elders and sorting them into appropriate social roles and schools helps in this process. The other more critical version of it, associated with Marxist scholars of education and other critical thinkers suggests that the sorting is an exercise of power that reproduces the privileges of dominant social groups through time (Connell, 2012). Schools play a role in reproducing the culture, including ideologies and specifically language ideologies, of the larger society through the socialisation process. And these language ideologies often play a mediating role between language and identity (Kroskrity, 2004). The reproduction of language ideologies has to be understood in the light of language markets. The linguistic unification of Assam as mentioned in chapter 2 led to the creation of a linguistic field, a market for standard Assamese. As Bourdieu argues, certain language utterances, practices can be conceptualised as conferring symbolic capital, which emerges within particular linguistic markets that are historically contingent (Bourdieu, 1991). Therefore, ideological constructions of language emerge from discrete language markets. It is, however, schools, that play an active role in reproducing the language market. Perceptions about language which are situated and partial, are actively produced and reproduced in educational institutions. There are various mechanisms through which this happens. The JBs therefore are also implicated in the reproduction of the language market and by that virtue reproduction of distinct ideas about language that emerge from these markets.

It is with this background that the language ideologies in a small JB are examined. To examine language ideologies and the school's role in the cultural transmission to students, the school has been conceptualised as a linguistic field where certain linguistic utterances and practices come to acquire more symbolic value owing to the properties of the field. Bourdieu (1991) conceptualised linguistic utterances or expressions as a form of practice and therefore they must be understood as the product of the relations between a linguistic habitus and a linguistic market. Linguistic utterances are always produced in particular contexts or markets and the properties of the market endow linguistic products with a certain value (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 18).

4.4 Ideological goals of the school

This school was set up in an effort to contribute and to help education in the mother tongue in 2000-01. There were definitely ideological goals of the school but, it was often difficult for the school to focus on them, rather the focus remained more on immediate goals (the functioning and survival of the school). Nonetheless, the goals were present. During one of the conversations I had with the owner, he recalled how he had helped set up schools in the mid and late 90s. As discussed in the previous chapter, many individuals were inspired to set up JBs in the 90s. The owner was close to Parag Das and both of them worked together to establish many JBs in different parts of lower Assam for the cause of the language. Parag Das is an important name when it comes to Assamese nationalism. He was a *jatiyatabadi* journalist who was known for his sentiments for the Assamese community and used to write in newspapers. His writings often championed the cause of the Assamese and was known for his sympathies for the banned outfit – ULFA. His son studied in Assam Jatiya Bidyalay (AJB) and on May 17, 1996, while on his way to pick up his son from school, he was assassinated, allegedly by the members of the surrendered militant outfit ULFA, known as SULFA. Before his death, Parag Das had also attempted to set up some schools in collaboration with others, including the owner of the current owner. Currently the owner has two schools, one in Patacharkuchi in Bajali district and one in Guwahati (the one where I did my field study). The owner used the mother's milk metaphor for highlighting the importance of *matri-bhasa* (mother-tongue) in education. He said that during that time 90s, Sankardev Sishu Niketans (SSN) were

also being set up in some parts of Assam but he said that he did not want to be part of it. Firstly, when SSNs were initially set up, they were out of bounds for Muslims, both teachers and students. He said that ‘we must not be so communal’. Secondly, teachers were given ideological training by RSS which he believed resulted in brainwashing and thirdly Sanskrit was compulsory from grade 1 till 8 in those schools, which he believed was too much for a 5-year-old child. This would be too much of a burden of language on kids. So, he was not in favour of SSN but preferred to start a JB instead.

It is interesting to note the comments alluded to the SSN. The SSN schools as described earlier are also schools in Assamese medium in the Brahmaputra valley but they are oriented towards Hindu nationalism. The owner’s preference for a JB highlights the nature of Assamese nationalism which maintained distance from religious exclusivism often associated with Hindu nationalism. Assamese nationalism is viewed differently as it is strictly based on language and not on religion. One might cite the contributions of numerous Muslim individuals to the cause of the Assamese language and nationalism (Mahanta, 2018). For example, the first martyr of the Medium of Instruction movement of 1972 was Mozammil Haque (ibid). Although the initial contributors who shaped Assamese nationalism did try to conceptualise a national religion in *Neo-Vaishnavism* (Sharma, 2006), and this religious aspect is an important one to the Assamese nationality, the fact remains that overall, it was not exclusively tied to religious identity, and actively incorporated elements from non-Hindu groups.

The owner emphasised the importance of ‘mother tongue’ education. About English, he mentioned that knowledge is more important than medium of instruction and said that ‘medium’ is no constraint for acquiring knowledge. For the middle classes¹³ (as he used it loosely), who don’t have that environment at home, students get easily influenced and some of them even go down the wrong path. Here, he was referring to English education where students acquire half-knowledge, due to the lack of support at home, and end up taking the negative aspects of Western culture. He was alluding to smoking, drinking and other vices typically associated with the youth. The environment is the most important

¹³ His sense of middle class would be closer to lower-middle class in an objective sense, but he used it loosely.

factor in language acquisition, he suggested. The common parents who don't have that environment at home, might not be able to help their kids with English. So, the Assamese medium is better for them. He wanted to do something for these people and, therefore, started a JB, i.e. a private school in Assamese medium. He mentioned a former student of the school who scored just 45% in English in matriculation but now he has moved and settled in Canada. The student calls him up and speaks fluent English, he mentioned. Since the middle classes don't have that environment at home, Assamese is more suited for them. The small JB that was set up by him was mostly catered to a certain class of people, the lower middle classes. His speeches and talks during teacher meetings as well as parent-teacher meetings suggested that he cared much about the language. The notion of 'mother-tongue' was used numerous times during his talks and speeches with parents. During public speeches like those on special occasions like Teachers' Day (celebrated on 5th September), the emphasis was even more. The school, thus, seemed to have a strong commitment to the Assamese language in terms of its formal approach. But owing to its limited resources by virtue of being a small school, it could not do much.

4.5 The curriculum

In the school, the curriculum that has been designed by the AJB was followed. The founders of the AJB using their social capital collaborated with academics from various schools, colleges and universities and were able to design a comprehensive syllabus from pre-nursery to grade 8 that includes numerous textbooks for all subjects. This curriculum is followed by all the JB schools that agree to follow the rules and regulations of the AJB. The curriculum has ample references to Assam, its heroes, the landscape, the folklore, the history, the geography and so on. The syllabus is so pertinent because Assamese nationalism is a running theme across their books. The curriculum is very much rooted in the ethos of Assam and the Assamese identity. While browsing through the textbooks, one finds repeated references to *Sankardev*, *Madhabdev*, the *Satras*, *Kamakhya*, all the heroes and cultural icons of the region, *Barpeta*, *Majuli*, *Bihu*, other folklore, and so on. Even an innocuous lesson in a standard 6 Hindi textbook called '*Saccha Chela*' (True bhakt), which I initially thought as just another story, is actually about *Madhabdev* and the 1st *Satradhikar* of *Barpeta Satra*, *Mathura Das Burha Ata*. The symbols celebrated in

the curriculum are the ones that emerged during the process of nationality formation in the 19th-20th century. The religious institutions, the *Satras*, the *Namghars*, the religious heroes, *Sankardeb*, *Madhavdeb*, *Damodardev* etc, holy religious sites like *Kamakhya*, regions like *Majuli*, *Barpeta*, etc, the national heroes like *Lachit Barphukan*, *Sati Joymoti*, *Bir Chilarai*, the national festival of *Bihu*, other important figures *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan*, *Bezbaruah*, *Jyotiprashad Agarwala*, *Bhupen Hazarika*, *Bishnu Rabha* etc, Kaziranga with the one-horned rhino considered the national (state) animal, and so on. Such examples are numerous. The Assamese sentiments in the curriculum are of course expected. After all, that is why the AJB was formed in the first place, to help the cause of the Assamese language and education in the mother-tongue. The curriculum plays a vital role in the shaping of perceptions around language and community. This does not mean that students have no agency and are simply indoctrinated. They may or may not internalise such sentiments. But the fact is there is an attempt through the curriculum to make students aware of the cultural ethos of the region. They get enough exposure through the syllabus. Although there was no detailed content analysis of the curriculum done, but since I taught in almost all the classes, I had a good understanding of what is there in the content. An example from inside the classroom is given below.

Once I went for a proxy class in standard 4. It was the sixth and last period and students wanted to sketch pictures. I agreed and asked them to sketch whatever they wanted. Some of them were confused and didn't know what to sketch. I asked them to refer to their textbooks and find something that they liked, to which they obliged.

One of the boys made a very fine sketch of a portrait. He was making the portrait by looking at the picture of a person who was in one of the lessons in the Assamese textbook (Image 4). It was a sketch of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. As discussed in Chapter 2, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan is considered the father of Assamese linguistic nationalism. He is credited with contributions in the mid-nineteenth century that sowed the seeds of language-based consciousness in the region. I was rather impressed by the fact that a 10-year-old student knows about Anandaram Dhekial Phukan when many are not aware of him, I myself got to know about him only during my post-graduation days. I was also impressed by the fact that when he referred to the sketch, he mentioned Phukan as if he

knew him very well. Comments like ‘Oi moi Anadaram’k aksu, toi ki akso?’ (Hey, I have drawn Anandaram, what have you drawn?) made it obvious that they knew about him and have been taught about him in the class. That Anandaram is mentioned in the Assamese textbook of standard 4 is no accident. The syllabus is designed like that. It helps to familiarise the students with cultural icons like those of Dhekial Phukan from early years on.

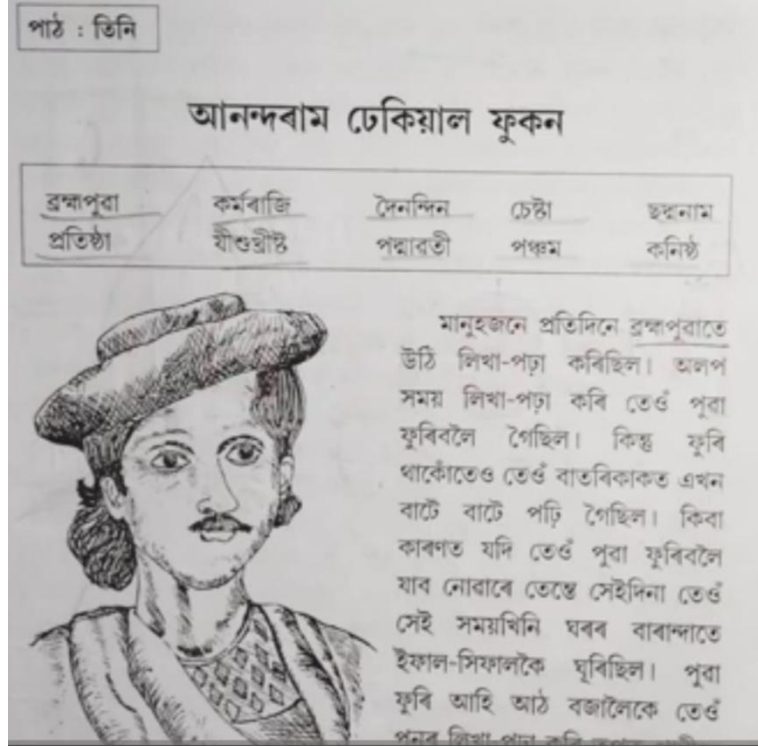


Image 4: The lesson on Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in the Assamese textbook of class 4. Source and picture credits: self-clicked.

4.6 Celebration of important events

The school followed the academic calendar of the AJB. So, it was bounded by the norms set up by them. As part of the norms, certain events were to be observed in the school. According to the calendar, classes begin in April and end in March next year. Some important events to be observed are – *Mahapurush diwas* which is celebrated on the occasion of *Madhabdev*'s birth anniversary generally in May, *Bishnu Rabha diwas* in June, Science Day and Independence Day in August, Teachers Day in September, *Bhupen Hazarika diwas* and Children's Day in November, *Lachit diwas* and *Swahid*

diwas, in December, Foundation Day, *Shilpi diwas* and Republic Day in January, and *Saraswati puja* in February. I was able to witness a few of these.

In the month of May of 2022, there was the 534th birth anniversary of *Madhabdev*, a Vaishnavite saint of the 16th century who was a disciple of *Sankardev*, the pioneer of Bhakti movement in Assam in medieval times and who is considered the *jatir pita* (national father). Both these saints are considered the pillars of Assamese society and Assam is often called the land of *Sankar-Madhab*. That Sankar and Madhab are considered important to the Assamese nationality is also due to the process of cultural construction (unification) in the early 20th century. Since *Madhabdev* is an important figure in Assam, it is a state holiday and all government schools remain closed on that day. But *Assam Jatiya Bidyalay* (AJB) and all the schools that follow the rules and regulations of AJB have their schools open on this day and they observe the occasion in the school. Students are expected to come to the school that day and take part in the cultural activities. In the case of AJB, it was a big event. This is as per sources in the school and also from their social media pages where one can see it clearly. AJB celebrates not just this event but all the events that are related to Assam's heroes in a grand manner. But in this school, although they were expected to observe the event, it was a mute affair.

The school, because of its funding issues, did not observe it as such. Rather, one of the teachers asked all the students to read about *Madhabdev* and write about him and submit the write-up the next day. There were some discussions about observing the event among the teachers. It was obvious that the event be observed as such. Mrs. S., the Assamese teacher, was not happy and remarked that 'Sankar-Madhab, are our main gurus (teachers), if students don't get to know about them what's the point of the school being a *Jatiya Bidyalay*; the aim of *Jatiya Bidyalay* is to protect the *Jati* (community) but there is no effort from the school'. This pointed to their disgruntlement with the owner (management). There was overall dissatisfaction with the functioning style of the school. Another teacher, Mr. B., in his mid-40s who taught Mathematics was also not happy with the management but he was more in favour of a holiday on that occasion. His argument was that it was unfair to compare this school with AJB. AJB was much larger, they had

resources and they paid teachers well. If comparisons are to be made then not just events, but other aspects must also be compared like teacher salary and so on, he believed. With the current salary, it was not worth it. It was not like he was against observing the event, he was more concerned about the salary which is quite low in the school. He believed if he got more salary, then it made sense, otherwise not. As a family man who is burdened with family responsibilities, he was keener on a holiday. His comments were more against the management rather than the event. But Mrs. S was more in favour of doing something like AJB. But ideological goals had to be sacrificed due to budgetary constraints. Therefore, on the occasion of *mahapurush diwas*, instead of any kind of a grand celebration, there was nothing at all. Students did write a short note on *Madhabdev* and read it out in the classroom in front of fellow students and teachers, but that was it. There were a few exceptions. One student, a girl from grade 5 wrote a *Borgeet* and recited in the class. Similarly, on the occasion of *Bishnu Rabha diwas*, there was no event organised either. During my stay, the Independence Day and Teachers Day were celebrated with much fervour. But in the case of the former, there was a directive from the government on the occasion of Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav. In the case of the latter, funds were somehow managed.

4.7 Everyday school practices

The conversations with the owner gave a glimpse of the ideological goals of the school, which was to help a certain section of the population by providing education in the mother-tongue, but after twenty long years, the school was more focused on the immediate need of survival and sustenance during the time I was present. Nonetheless, there were some efforts to focus on the ideological goals as well. And these were not just about language or mother-tongue, but were also about discipline and producing the ideal students who are educated in their mother-tongue. And these efforts came more from some senior female teachers, although the management also did some bit. Not all teachers were interested in all this, for most of them it was more about taking classes and going home. But some teachers were very concerned. One female teacher, Mrs S, the Assamese teacher in her late 40s or early 50s who was like a mother figure in the school, used to

repeatedly give lectures on morals, community, language etc during the morning assembly.

4.7.1 The morning assembly

The morning assembly takes place at 8:45 am inside the school premises in the play area. And consists of two anthems fused together, first the '*Saraswati Vandana*'¹⁴ and the second which is Assam's *Jatiya Sangeet* (national song) '*O mor aponar desh*'¹⁵ written by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, a noted literary figure of modern Assamese literature. The *Vandana* is dedicated to the Hindu goddesses of learning Saraswati and the recitation is done in Sanskrit while the *Jatiya Sangeet* is recited in Assamese. No one in the school including the teachers or students knew Sanskrit but the recitation was done by heart. *O mor aponar desh* is the state anthem of Assam and is used in all government organisations, including government schools, functions etc. It was composed by Bezbaruah in the early 20th century during the process of Assamese nationality formation. It has much sentimental value to the community.

During the assembly, except for a few, most of the students would rush and finish it. Mrs S. would repeatedly remind them not to rush while reciting their prayers and to do it slowly as per the tune that is supposed to be there, in a relaxed manner. During the *Vandana* (recitation), she would ask the students to think of the devi Saraswati, and think deeply so that they do well in their studies. She would also sometimes remind them of the Saraswati *mandir* that is located at the entrance of the school and how they seek her blessings as a way to take their prayers seriously. She once asked some senior students to volunteer and lead the prayer proceedings. And when this was done, she gave an analogy. She said just like the purohits (priests) who lead while we do our prayers and we respect them, the ones leading during the prayer in the schools are also like purohits (priests) and they deserve respect. This was one way of enticing students to take their prayers more seriously. And while singing the *Jatiya Sangeet*, she would ask students to think of the contents of the anthem. She would ask them to think of 'our' *matribhoomi* (motherland),

¹⁴ Saraswati Vandana is also sung in SSNs

¹⁵ Most of the private Assamese schools use it during the morning prayer.

‘our’ *jati* (Assamese nationality) ‘our’ *mati* (land), and ‘our’ *bhasa* (language). The *Jatiya Sangeet* which is a patriotic anthem about Assam was invoked in this case to arouse sentiments for land and language. Such lectures on morals and community were often repeated, not by other teachers but by Mrs. S. Another female teacher, Miss. M, around 30 years old, the social science teacher, would also sometimes ask students to sing the *Jatiya Sangeet* slowly, with the tune and with feelings. The point was that only when the anthem is sung with the tune like the original can it invoke feelings and touch the soul. The principal also once in a while gave lectures on morals but these were unrelated to community sentiments. They were more on discipline and conduct.

4.7.2 Language teaching in the school

The role of monolingual ideologies of language and their role in shaping nationality formation has been alluded to previous chapter. Ideologies of language affect language pedagogy in schools as well. In India, monolingual beliefs about language underlie much of the policy discourses about the language (medium) of instruction in the classroom. Despite the indication of a move towards a multilingual approach to teaching and learning Indian languages in the National Curricular Framework (NCF) in 2005, the ideas and beliefs about language learning among academics and policymakers continue to be influenced by monolingual assumptions even as some scholars have pointed toward the existence of multilingual classrooms (Jhingran, 2009). In recent times, the multilingual approach to education has generated much attention. Multilingualism is a belief and a practice of language teaching where teachers are expected to make full use of students’ linguistic diversity (Agnihotri, 2010). In more recent years, ideas about translanguaging as a pedagogic practice/strategy, which is centred on the practice of multilinguals and not on languages (as has often been the case), have been widely discussed as an alternative to conventional approaches towards language learning (Garcia, 2009, p. 140). However, in this school, like in most other schools, monolingual ideas of language seemed to persist.

4.7.2.1 Teaching English and Hindi in Assamese

In the school, the teaching of English takes place in Assamese, i.e., Assamese is used to teach the content that is in English. This practice was followed by the other English teacher who was present and was also followed by me once I started taking classes in

grades 8, 9 and 10. Initially once or twice I tried explaining the content in English but I soon realised that it was futile. The students, except maybe one or two, didn't really understand if taught in English. After I made them read the text, often they would often say, 'sir, buja nai, axomiyat bujai diok' (sir, we have not understood, explain it in Assamese), and I would do so. When explained in Assamese, however, the students would understand the text, they would also remember it, the finer details about the story etc but they had a hard time replying to questions in English. When I asked a question in English, they sometimes didn't get it. The same question when I translated and repeated in Assamese, they were able to reply in Assamese but not in English. In the process, I realised the difference between teachers' perception of students' abilities and their actual potential. For example, one of the students in grade nine, whom most of the teachers described as weak and inattentive, and one of the bad influences on the other 'good' students, scored very low marks in English as in other subjects. But during my classes where I explained the English lesson as a story in Assamese and later on asked questions to check if they understood the lesson, this particular student seemed to retain what was told in class compared to the rest. He was also able to answer questions from within the text. It seemed that he was weak in communicative English, but he was certainly not unintelligent. When explained in a language he was familiar with, he was able to retain what was taught in class. However, he faced challenges writing answers in English. Similar patterns were also observed in some of the junior grades. In grades 5, 6 and 7, I often took general knowledge Quiz and they used to love it. They were very enthusiastic about the quiz and would often ask me to skip class and take the quiz instead. I used to conduct the quiz in Assamese. But for a couple of days, I decided to experiment and tried taking the quiz in English. All I met was blank faces and no enthusiasm. The same questions that they were able to answer in Assamese and they knew the answers but when these were asked in English they didn't understand. The junior classes had some of the smartest kids, they were sharp and intelligent but it's just that they had some trouble comprehending English that they weren't able to answer the questions. And because they struggled with English, some of them found it boring and showed no enthusiasm for learning either.

There are a few reasons why this was so. The school had a perpetual challenge of retaining English teachers. Teachers would come and go and as per the students, many of them were not very good at teaching the language. Absentee teachers and a lack of qualified English teachers were the main reasons why students had some disconnect with English. Also, English had very little functional importance for them and it was not used outside the classroom, and that too very little was used during English classes. So, students had very little exposure to English. Since other subject teachers were also educated in Assamese medium and they too didn't show much enthusiasm towards English, this affected the students' perception of the language.

The students were more at ease with Hindi compared to English. During the time I taught Hindi, I could see that many of them were quite fluent in the language. It is understandable since they had more exposure to Hindi compared to English and therefore more familiar with it. Except for some students in grade 5 where Hindi is taught for the first time and some in higher grades, most students were comfortable with the language. During one of the Hindi proxy classes in 5th standard, I realised that some of the students were not very fluent in Hindi. It was expected since they begin Hindi classes only from class 5. I thought of making them practice spoken Hindi as I used to do with English as well and made comments in Hindi, 'aaj hum Hindi me baat karenge' (today we will speak in Hindi) but this was met with subtle defiance by some students, not all though, who claimed 'na aami nokoru, aami Axomiya' (no we won't, we are Assamese). Such open defiance by some of the students points to something else. Students think of languages in certain ways. In this case, the students didn't really have a problem with Hindi and many of them could converse in it fluently but they liked the class to be taken in Assamese as is the norm in the school. English classes and Hindi classes are taught in the Assamese medium in the school. Hence the insistence. But the matter was easily resolved when I reverted back to the norm, i.e. taught them Hindi in Assamese and explained and asked them questions in Assamese and not in Hindi. Most other students in other classes were very comfortable in Hindi. Hindi dialogues from movies, songs were commonly used amongst them. During my stay, I didn't observe any antagonistic feelings towards Hindi by anyone as such. They had exposure to Hindi, could speak the language as well, and were comfortable in general. This might explain why when anti Hindi protests emerge in

some parts of India, it is almost a non-issue here in Assam. In fact, the majority of the students from grades 9 (except two students) and 10 had taken Hindi as an elective subject when they had the option to take either Fine Arts or Advanced Mathematics. However, just like English teaching, Hindi teaching also takes place in Assamese. Just like the former teacher, I also taught Hindi in Assamese.

The difference and sharp contrast in learning outcomes for Hindi and English emerged more clearly while doing the exercises in the textbook. In Hindi classes, when I told them the answers (and marked them in the textbooks) and asked them to write the answers on their own, they obliged happily since they were confident about being able to do it. However, in English classes, students were unanimous that I give them detailed notes on the Question & Answer section. Even when I showed them where the answers were in the book, they lacked the confidence to write the answers themselves. They demanded notes from me which I used to give them later on, after much effort. There were some rare exceptions though. Only one student in grade 8, the first boy in the class, was confident about writing answers on his own. But overall, English was difficult for the majority of students.

4.8 Perceptions about languages

The three languages, Assamese, English and Hindi are taught in the school as part of the three- language formula. English is taught from grade 4 while Hindi is taught from grade 5 onwards. Assamese, of course, is taught from the very beginning. Because of the unique properties of this particular field by virtue of being an Assamese medium school, the three languages receive differential evaluation by the actors, be it students or teachers in the school. The interactions with the teachers and the students in the classroom where I taught them English, Hindi and other subjects, gave me a sense of how they perceive languages.

Since this was an Assamese medium school, students were most comfortable in the Assamese language. This was true for even those students who were from other linguistic communities like Bengali, Bodo, Nepali etc. English, on the other hand, was the most difficult for them. Hindi was relatively easier for them compared to English since they

had exposure to the language via the media and so on. Owing to their lower middle-class background by virtue of which they had less cultural capital (more specifically linguistic capital) at home, some students displayed a fatalistic attitude towards English wherein they had accepted that they don't know much about it and won't get better over time and hence they had given up. Some others on the other hand wanted to improve and tried their best. A select few were good in English and made efforts to improve further. But overall, for all of them, English was the toughest language for them, in terms of speaking and writing or in terms of the examinations.

When asked about how they feel about these languages, for Assamese, the most common response was that it was their *matribhasa* (mother-tongue), *nijor bhasa* (own language) and others like *ghar'r bhasa* (home language) etc. Although many students identified Assamese as their 'mother-tongue', some students who spoke languages that are linguistically considered dialects of Assamese were prompt to say that 'their' language was *Nalbaria* or *Barpetiya*¹⁶ etc. In this case, the linguistic scenario in Assam is similar to North India where Hindi subsumes many regional varieties of languages as its dialects. In Chapter 2, linguistic unification in Assam was discussed. Although the tension between upper and lower geographic terrain of Assam was largely resolved, lower Assam people were quite sentimental about their regional language varieties and maintained a distinction between the *kothito* (spoken) and *likhito* (written) varieties. Here, *Barpetiya* and *Nalbaria* are two of the major linguistic varieties in lower Assam. When asked about Hindi, many replied that it was *desh'r bhasa* (country's language), *rashtra bhasa* (national language) etc. Some were more ambivalent and not so sure. For English, most of their responses were that it was a *bideshi bhasa* (foreigners' language), *Ingraz'r bhasa* (language of the English people) etc. The above examples highlight the process of iconisation where linguistic features embody social distinctions, with Assamese or *Nalbaria* or *Barpetia* indexing the region, be it Assam or one of the districts, Hindi indexing the country and English indexing the foreigner (LaDousa, 2005).

¹⁶ Nalbari, Barpetia are districts in the state of Assam. Nalbaria or Barpetiya are like subdialects of Kamrupia which itself is considered a dialect of Assamese.

It is important to note here, that although the formal classes were taught in the standard Assamese, the language that was used by most of the students as well as teachers was not the standard, but rather *Kamrupi*, the local language variety. Whether in the playground, in the informal chats and conversations amongst students or sometimes even between teachers and students, it was *Kamrupi* that was used. This can be clearly seen in the classroom practices. This was applicable even to teachers who were fluent in *Kamrupi*. Even inside the classroom, although there were strict rules about writing the language, the rules were relaxed when it came to the spoken language. It would not be unfair to say that many of the students were not so fluent in standard Assamese despite being able to write it properly. They were more comfortable with the spoken variety. Also, although technically the language is *Kamrupi*, but it was never explicitly mentioned as *Kamrupi* by anyone. It was simply understood to be Assamese which was slightly different from the standard.

Since the school was established with the aim of providing education in the ‘mother-tongue’, and there was much emphasis on Assamese during every day practices like the morning assembly, the classroom and so on, students displayed quite a bit of sentiment for Assamese. The language evoked pride in them. Hindi, although did not evoke any specific sentiment for the students. For most students, except very few, English was not of much interest to them. In fact, for many, English was the most difficult subject, where they struggled to get passing marks. Many of them didn’t like the subject at all since it was the most difficult for them. If we were to consider the school as a linguistic field (market) then the value of English in that field (market) was very low. I wouldn’t say it was zero, but it was low. The inhabitants of this linguistic world knew that they could carry on with their lives without much use of English very easily, hence the low value attached to English. In class, students were neither impressed by the correct pronunciations and nuances of accent, nor by correct English in general. These ideas were alien to them. In my classes, I would often try spoken English with the students. For some, this was very scary, some were comfortable but for most, it was boring and tedious. One student in grade 9 and one in grade 8 however stood out. The one in grade 9 could speak well compared to others and was keenly interested in improving his English skills. I also encouraged him as well as others in the class to take an interest in English by

telling them how it can help in their careers later on. The other in grade 8 was even more interested. He would often ask me to practice English with him. I would sometimes do it but there was a lack of interest from the rest of the class in general. So, it happened only rarely. It must be mentioned that this student's class background is relevant here. Unlike the rest of the students who were from poorer backgrounds, this student's father worked at the Public Works Department (PWD), he was a government officer and the student's more middle-class background probably explains it. Thus, except for a few students who were very enthusiastic about English and even followed English YouTube channels, watched English movies and even joked with deliberately fake English accents, most of the students displayed very little eagerness for the language. Some of them however, were quite curious about Hinglish, the popular way of speaking which is a mixture of both Hindi and English and used widely in Delhi, Mumbai and also by Bollywood celebrities. For students, a standard, correct and pure language, especially a foreign language like English is difficult but a *khichdi* (mixed) language with relaxed grammatical rules is easier to relate to.

Since it is an Assamese school, in day-to-day conversations, sentiments about Assamese are not overtly seen among teachers since it is normalised and internalised. But nonetheless, it was evident in some instances. Mrs. S, the Assamese teacher was very concerned about the handwriting of the students, especially those of the lower grades. Some of them had extremely bad writing. She, therefore, would teach them handwriting in some classes. Additionally, during the summer vacations, she took a handwriting workshop for the junior classes. I managed to attend some portion of it but I was assigned some classes elsewhere¹⁷, so I didn't get to see much. However, it was obvious that much emphasis was given on how to write properly and how to write the alphabets using the correct turn, i.e. the sequence of the movement of the pencil. There was a concern for handwriting, yes, but there was also equally a concern for purity of language. Good handwriting, written correctly is an essential quality for the purity of language.

The purity and the sanctity of language must be maintained. This is part of the standard language ideology. It was in this context that she was more interested in taking

¹⁷ During the summer break, there were extra classes going on for classes 9 and 10.

handwriting workshops I believed. There were obvious objectives (handwriting must be improved) but latent objectives as well. That she was very concerned about the language was obvious in many of the staff room interactions where she would lament that nowadays students don't even know the meaning of basic Assamese words like *mojiya* (floor), *puṛnima* (full moon), *amavaśhya* (new moon); that they don't know about different kinds of Assamese *xaak* (green leafy items that are consumed) and so on. She blamed the parents for not using such words themselves and that it is impossible to teach everything to students. Proper usage of language and language purity were thus of concern at least among some teachers, especially the female teachers. These perceptions about language of course get transmitted to students inside the classroom and contribute to forming their own perceptions about language. This concern for purity was also observed in the day-to-day interactions. The attendance registers, exam schedules, and class routines were maintained mostly in correct standard Assamese. But that was not always the case. In some attendance registers, sometimes names would be written in English. This would happen if some new teacher joined and wrote it like that. But the senior faculty, especially female teachers, were more particular. And this was the case even in the text messages in the WhatsApp staff group. Most of them used the Assamese script to write the messages while the male teachers were more relaxed in their approach, using sometimes Assamese or sometimes Roman script. However, this was true more in the case of the formal staff group rather than personal messages. The formal-informal use also deserves a mention. In the Whatsapp group, it was seen that when teachers, especially females, posted a formal message like their inability to come to school that day, it was done in pure correct Assamese (Assamese language in the Assamese script) but sometimes, although not always, when there are informal messages posted things are more liberal and even the roman script is also used. The question of script is a sentimental one for the Assamese and this is discussed in chapter 6.

But what about English, one might ask. The question of medium becomes important only when it is contrasted with English. My stay in the school showed that amongst the teachers and students alike, there were ambivalent feelings towards it. While some teachers acknowledged the importance of English, for most others it was a non-issue. Mr G, aged around 28 who taught science and maths in the school and was also preparing for

civil services did acknowledge the importance of English and he himself was interested in improving his skills. Sometimes, in the staff room, he would read the English texts to increase his English skills. Mr K, aged around 24 and who taught science in the school, seemed relatively more comfortable in English due to his schooling in AJB and subsequent college degree in a private University and had positive notions about English. In the linguistic worlds that they exist in, English had very little functional use. Of course, basic English is required for everyday life but that is taken for granted since everyone has those skills. Here I mean English as a competency.

In the month of July 2022, there was an announcement by the government of Assam that from the next Academic Year, in government and provincialized schools, teaching of Mathematics and Science would take place in English instead of Assamese, i.e. the course content of these two subjects would be in English. The proposal by the government seemed to be an attempt to make government schools popular again as they have gone out of fashion and more and more students continue to opt for private schools, be it Assamese or English medium. The justification given by the government is that teaching Science and Mathematics education in English would benefit students in the long-run in higher studies where these subjects are taught in English. Although at that point it was not very clear how exactly this would be implemented, the students when they heard about this announcement, were quite scared. The teachers were also apprehensive about this move as this would mean almost the death of Assamese medium education. If implemented, then only social science would be taught in Assamese. Some students, when they heard about it, were apprehensive and asked if this was really going to happen. I said that there is a proposal but it has not yet been implemented and that it was meant only for government schools. I tried to assure them by saying that in private schools like theirs, probably it wouldn't happen. They remarked, 'sir, aamak nalage, enekei bhal' (sir, we don't need, its better like the way it is). Their fear was understandable. English was only one subject, one in which they were not very comfortable, and had to deal with. If two more subjects, and that too the tough ones like Maths and Science, are taught in English then the burden of English would be too much for them.

When the announcement was made, there were protests from several civil society organisations like AASU, Assam Sahitya Sabha, political parties like Rajgor Dal etc who demanded that the government must not go ahead with such a step. There were protests organised in many parts of the state. The government didn't back down but instead, as a compromise went ahead and published bilingual textbooks for Maths and Science for use in the government schools. In these bi-lingual textbooks, on one page the content is in English and on the other page, the content is in Assamese which seems like a progressive step towards multilingual education. The AASU who initially protested against Maths and Science textbooks in English welcomed the move of bilingual textbooks and the issue has now settled. The bi-lingual approach to textbooks might have implications for the future of Assamese education. It remains to be seen how this will play out in the future. The bilingual books feature translations of the content in Assamese and English. Most teachers who work in schools, especially in the vernacular schooling space are not bilingual. They lack proficiency in English and as described in the case of this school, are nonchalant about the acquisition of linguistic skills in English since in their worlds, English does not have much functional importance. So, although the government has introduced bilingual books, whether this will really be a step towards bilingual education remains to be seen. The lack of teachers who are bilingual, that is who are proficient in both languages, might affect the whole process.

4.9 Conclusion – ideology, sentiments and survival

This chapter has focussed on a small JB and its everyday activities. Although the everyday practices and classroom activities in the school play an active role in the process of socialisation or inculcating a habitus in Bourdieusian terms, which leads actors to acquire a set of dispositions, it has its limitations. The school operates under market conditions and as such it is not able to focus much on its ideological goals. Due to its limited resources and lack of capital, it is not able to do much. The market has its logic of competition, choice and profit which results in the energies of the school being diverted to ensure the survival of the school. Relatively stable and large schools like the AJB are less affected. But a small school like this survives under precarious conditions. The ruthless competition in the market results in students moving away and choosing other

schools. The school is forced to run as a business. The main argument of this chapter is that owing to the market logic, the ideological goals of the school take a backseat. This argument is developed further in the next chapter by looking at the actual operation of school markets in a small neighbourhood.