

CHAPTER 5

Market and competition: *school as a business organisation*

5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, the ideological dimensions of the school were analysed since the school is a *Jatiya Bidyalay* that was established with some definite ideological goals. But at the same time, it is a private school that operates under market conditions. In this chapter, the school competition is examined and the economics of a small school is looked at. Since the school is dependent on market principles for survival, it has to seek parents who would pay to avail the services of education for their children, so it's never easy for the school. Therefore, there exists a contradiction between the two – a small private school that struggles to survive but also one that is committed to the cause of 'mother-tongue' education.

5.2 The language market and the school market

The school market and the language market are intricately related. Although in the current study, both these markets have been conceptualised as fields, there is one small distinction between the two. The school market is the market where actual monetary transactions occur for the exchange of a commodity, in this case – education or the service of education. The language market on the other hand is a symbolic market where certain linguistic utterances have more symbolic value owing to the properties of the field but in this market, there is no actual buying or selling of any commodity. The creation of linguistic states by the government of India was an attempt to create several language markets in the country. These markets are sustained and supported by the state education system where education is imparted in the regional Indian languages which confers symbolic capital to the languages. Since the education system has the ability to organise symbolic capital by training students in a particular type of language (i.e. official language), it has a dominant role to play in the production of the mass of producers and consumers of linguistic capital and hence has a monopoly over the reproduction of the language market (Bourdieu, 1991; LaDousa, 2005, p. 468). In the case of Assam, the

state government schools played that part by teaching Assamese. But the failure of the state government schools in Assam to retain students and to stop the flight of students from government schools (in Assamese medium) to private English medium schools jeopardised the Assamese language market. The private schools (in Assamese medium) emerged as a reaction to this failure of the state to protect and promote the interests of people associated with the Assamese language. The Assamese private schools thus play a role (along with the state government schools) in reproducing the Assamese language market. But the fact remains that these are private schools and do not receive any financial assistance from the government. The chapter explores how market logic affects the functioning of the school that was set up primarily to protect the interests of Assamese-speaking people. This chapter draws from Bourdieu (1991, 2005) and Fligstein's (2001) idea of markets as fields, where actors are viewed as trying to ensure the survival of their firms, and where they try to produce a local stable world. Survival and stability, therefore, take precedence over profit-making, although goals of profiteering are not absent altogether.

5.3 The school and its position in the field

The school competition in the vernacular market is examined in the neighbourhood. In that locality (of a 2-3 km radius), there are different kinds of schools, a few government schools (Assamese medium), one government school for blind students, five private English medium schools and three *Jatiya Bidyalays*. KGFZJB is more in direct competition for students with the two other JBs, named CNGJB and BMYJB and also to some extent with the government schools. I visited all three JBs during my field visit to learn more about the schools as part of my survey and ended up doing fieldwork in KGFZJB. The school details of KGFZJB were elaborated in the previous chapter. The other two are also similar.

CNGJB is another JB that is located nearby to this school. This was started by a government teacher in the year 2006 along with his wife. The school operated from a rented place but in 2020, due to Covid, they couldn't continue and ended up selling the school to the person on whose land the school was set up. So, now they are the new owners of the school, although the wife of the previous owner continues to be the head

teacher of the school. It is a small school, with two sets of pucca (concrete) houses, parallel to each other which have the classrooms. In between the two, there is some open space but it is not much for play or games. The owner's house is in the adjacent plot. The school, however, has computers and there are computer classes in the school unlike in KGFZJB, where there are none. In this school, the fees range from 450-850 rupees per month, as informed during my interview, and earlier it was 350-600. So, there was an increase in fees after the Covid pandemic. Their enrolment was more than 300 previously but during the time of my meeting, it was 220 students. The UDISE+ school report card shows 244 students as of September 2021. BMYJB is another JB that operates from that locality. This school was started in the year 2001. The school operates from an Assam-type house. Out of all three, this school has the lowest fees and the highest enrolment. Monthly fees range from 300-700 and admission fees are 3000, making it much more affordable for poorer parents as compared to KGFZJB. In terms of enrolment, I was informed that they had more than 450 students at that time. The UDISE+ school report card shows it to be 375 as of September 2021. Therefore 450 seems correct since in the year 2022, there was an increase in enrolment at this school. KGFZJB therefore is among the three JBs that operate in the area and there is competition between the schools to get students and also for teachers. It has the highest fees compared to all three but the lowest enrolment among them.

Amongst the three JBs, there was a mobility of teachers and students. There were also instances where students had moved to and from government schools to this school. Many teachers of course aspire for government jobs and they leave once they secure those jobs, either in teaching or other clerical jobs. But during my stay, I did not see any such mobility though, except one who cleared the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) and moved to a government school. What was more common, however, was movement between the JBs. Many teachers who worked in KGFZJB moved to BMYJB over the years. BMYJB which had the highest number of students and the lowest fees was attractive to teachers because they paid relatively better than KGFZJB, the main reason being since they had more students, they could afford to pay more. Similarly, students also moved to BMYJB because of the lower fees. This was even more after Covid when many people lost livelihoods and had less spending capacity. But reverse cases were also

seen. There were cases where students from CNGJB and BMYJB had also migrated to KGFZJB with the hopes of better learning. So not all migration was due to monetary reasons.

About BMYJB, the owner of the present school, KGFZJB was very critical. For him, the JB's play an important role in the education scenario of the region by offering education in mother tongue to the middle class (as he likes to put it). The rich and affluent go to English schools while for the very poor, there are government schools. Now if JB's also try and get all those students who generally go to government schools by allowing them to pay 100 or 200 and get enrolment, then it's not right or fair, according to him. The standard must be maintained. He said that the private nature of the school means that it is a business and it is understood that they, as management, are committed to providing quality education, although they charge more fees than the other schools. He said that they would rather have 'pandavs than kauravs' (characters from Mahabharata), i.e. quality students that are less in number than a large number of low-quality students and they are not looking to gain more students by lowering the fees. He was critical of such competitive tactics by such schools which he thinks was destroying the quality of education in those schools. His criticisms are understandable since many of the students had migrated to that school and even some teachers have also joined that school over the years. What the owner is alluding here is to different types of schools cater to different sections of the population. While the elite sections have the better English medium schools and the poor sections have the government schools, the JB's cater to the middle sections by providing quality education in return for a fee. He was critical that some JB's were compromising the quality of education in the name of economic security.

5.4 The school as a business – customers *baki't sole* (live on credit)

The school runs as a small business in a market where many similar schools compete to get the students. James Tooley (2009) in his work on low-cost schools suggests that many of such schools are quite profitable. Prachi Srivastava (2013) however, mentions that the notion of profit at these low-fee private schools is different from shareholders investing in a company as in a pure business model, particularly in family-run and owned schools. In terms of affordability, she says that private providers project an image of affordability

through flexible fee policies to sustain demand in a low-income setting. She suggests that her own work in Lucknow district showed that the motivations of low fee private school owners were complex, some wanted to help their communities (particularly in rural areas), but they had to reconcile competing interests such as philanthropy and profit-making. She says there were examples of schools setting fees at inflated figures and then providing concessions for some households, thereby charging less amounts, on the basis of the household's ability to negotiate amounts. Thus, 'free' places were the result of parents bargaining and /or schools' unwillingness to expel students who were in arrears, retaining clientele in the hopes that they may pay in the future.

My field data, also echoing Srivastava's work, suggests that the nature of such schools is more complex. Due to the lower middle-class and lower-class clientele, the school struggled to collect monthly fees in a timely manner. There was a massive problem with collecting fees in the school. Some students had not cleared their dues for months, some even years. The school was forced to give out fee concessions or waivers in some cases. There was a constant attempt to recover the fees from the defaulting students. This has to do more with the survival of the firm (school) rather than maximizing profits.

The fee structure of the school is shown below.

Grade	No of Stud	Monthly fees	Admission fees	Monthly coll.
Ankur (Nursy)	15	350	2500	5250
Prak (KG)	8	450	2800	3600
1	13	550	3000	7150
2	8	600	3300	4800
3	15	650	3500	9750
4	20	650	3500	13000
5	16	700	3800	11200
6	8	750	4000	6000
7	14	800	4000	11200
8	9	1000	5000	9000
9	13	1200	6000	15600
10	8	1500	6000	12000
Total	147			108550

Table 5.1: The monthly fee and admission fee of the school along with the monthly collection for the academic year 2022. Source: compiled manually

In the year, 2022, due to Covid-19, many private schools faced a crisis in retaining their students due to increased economic insecurities. In this school, similar fears were looming and to retain students, the administration waived the admission fees for the first six grades. This was a survival strategy since there were too many schools in the neighbourhood, including two JB's in the close vicinity. Without such tactics, it would be difficult for them to get students in these times, as per the principal.

In regular times as well, there was a massive problem of collection of fees in the school. For example, although ideally, the monthly fee collection should be around a lakh (as mentioned in the table), in the month of April-May, only a partial amount (around 35-40K) was collected. This was because there were a lot of students who were defaulters. Guardians would approach the owner, plead and try to negotiate a lesser fee or ask for more time. The owner, although he was a disciplinarian with the students and teachers, seemed to be quite benevolent in these matters. Also, since these were not easy situations, he would agree temporarily and later would put some teachers in charge of collecting fees from students. In this sense, the school was not really bureaucratic and lacked efficiency. Things happened more on a personal level and through personal relationships. According to teachers, some parents had genuine issues due to which they couldn't pay the fees. So, some of them didn't pay for months at a stretch and then cleared it in one go by taking a small loan. But this was not always the case. There have been cases where parents of a student did not pay for the entire year and then instead of clearing the fees and proceeding to the next grade, they took the student and put him in a different school. Others delayed paying the fee and then cleared it from time to time. In a sense, some parents were quite short sighted and they didn't plan it out. They, to use the Assamese term, *baki't sole* (they lived on credit).

So, the question of school choice for these parents would be very different. Their lack of capital constrained their choices and did not allow them to think ahead, rather they were forced to deal with the immediate future as and how they encountered it. It is important to note that students not paying fees for years at a stretch were only a few. For others, some paid on time while some delayed paying but then cleared it in a few months.

The management's point was that since they were not able to collect fees on time, they were not able to improve the school. Their hands were tied as they could not develop the infrastructure. For example, the toilets in the school were not very well maintained. Some teachers lamented that guardians were to be partially blamed for some of the mess of the school. And because guardians took so many favours from the owner, they lost the moral right to question the school when it came to genuine concerns. Also, there were cases where the guardians took advantage of the school. For example, some economically better-off guardians did not clear the fees on time but the relatively poorer ones did.

The fees problem was so enormous and normalised that the management had come up with a template to send to the parents (Image 5). The existence of such a template would suggest that this was a recurring challenge. They would either use this template or write a short application and then ask the teachers to give it to the students who would then inform their parents. The fees issue was a recurring issue and instead of looking at profit, the school was forced to look at survival. This shows that, echoing Srivastava's work that although the school was forced to operate under market conditions, it was not exactly the same as pure businesses and the school dealt with students, live human beings and not inanimate things. But at the same time, it must be emphasised despite this, the school ran as a business. Sure, there are challenges but it was still a business. The owner made this clear, not once, but many times during different parent-teacher meetings when he stated that 'this is a private school and it is a business. Private schools mean one needs to pay a fee to get enrolment and that guardians need to be aware of this aspect before enrolling their kids there'.

5.5 School strategies and practices

The smooth running of the school depends on getting a steady stream of students and managing to collect fees on time. But there are challenges as mentioned in the previous section. The stability of the school, however, depends on the teachers. Teachers play a vital role not just in ensuring the reputation of the school and how others perceive it, but also many teachers have their own fan following. In small schools, it is not uncommon for students to sometimes follow their teachers when the teachers move to other schools.

Recruiting teachers, retaining them as well giving them incentives therefore are relevant when we study the school as a business organisation.

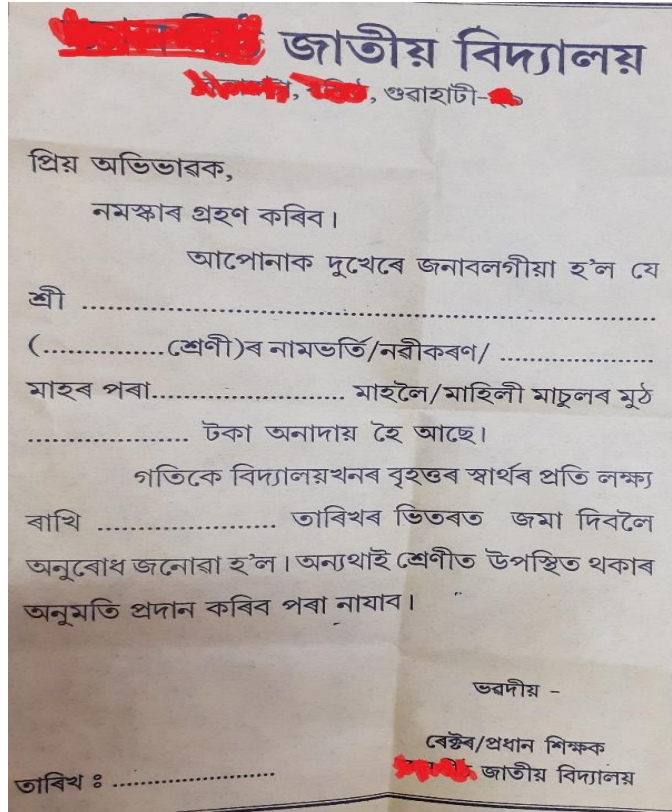


Image 5: The template used by the school to send notice to defaulters for collection of fees. Roughly it translates to 'dear guardian, mr/miss ...has not cleared the fees till...In the interest of the school you are requested to clear the fees, otherwise the student will not be allowed inside the classroom. Source and pic credit: self-clicked.

5.5.1 Low teacher salaries, pay cuts and informalisation of teacher recruitment

The fees problem had a cascading effect on teacher salaries and the school was unable to pay on time sometimes, with a few days delay being common. Teacher salaries ranged from 2500 to 7000 per month. Low salaries are expected as the school was a low fee school, less fees means lower salaries, since there was no additional financial support. Those that taught the lower grades got less salary since they were easily replaceable. Similarly, the ones teaching Maths, Science or English in higher classes were paid more

since they were hard to find. The salary was based mostly on what subject the teacher teaches and at times on the experience of the teachers. But there was no fixed rule to it. For example, even senior teachers, ones working for 5-6 years, were paid only 4-5 thousand. There were hardly any other allowances in addition to salary. However, teachers did get some benefits that were initiated by the school. The teachers got an option of going for a scheme in the Employee State Insurance (ESI)¹⁸ hospital that is located in Khanapara, where they can avail free treatment. This, however, was not provided by the school. The school made the teachers aware that such a scheme is available and they can avail it.

But because of the low salary and also because some of the teachers had issues with the owner, it was not uncommon to see teachers come and go. Teachers would be there for one or two months and then leave. The average time span for such teachers who come and go is roughly three months. Also, teachers for certain subjects were hard to find like those of English, Maths, Science etc since they have more demand. Some would leave once they get better opportunities. Since teachers come and go, recruitment took place every-once-in a while.

When it came to teacher recruitment, since the school follows the AJB's rules and regulations, ideally it should hold a written exam and then an oral exam but the owner's wish prevailed in any case. Written exams were never held and only a brief oral interview would be held. Also, as per AJB guidelines, only those individuals who did their schooling in an Assamese medium school were to be selected and if selected, their children must also study in an Assamese school but this was also not enforced. For example, there were teachers whose children were studying in English schools during that time. This shows that the rules of AJB are not followed precisely by the school. They exist mostly on paper. It must be noted that these events happened at a time when the school was going through a bad phase when it was finding it hard to retain students and was dealing with a lack of teachers.

¹⁸ ESI – Employee State Insurance hospitals are run by state governments where patients can avail services at subsidised rates.

One peculiar practice during recruitment in the school was the ‘spoken words’ that held more weight than a piece of paper. The owner would say, ‘come from tomorrow’ and that was all that was needed. There was no formal documentation, no paperwork. Also, the salary was not told beforehand to the candidate. The person was selected and when asked about the salary, the owner would reply that whatever other gets paid, they will be paid the same. This way some individuals worked for some time only to be disappointed later that the salary was too less and then they left the school. Take for example the case of Miss. H. in her 20s, who joined in April as a Hindi teacher, and taught Hindi from 6 to 10. She obtained Hindi honours from one of the colleges and was an ex-student of the school. When she spoke to the owner about the salary, he said that she would be paid what others were paid and asked her to ask others, but no one told her anything. There was no document, no mention of what she will be paid either. When salaries came, she got 3000 as the salary, which she believed was quite low. Naturally, she was upset and spoke to the owner. Contrary to her expectations of a raise, she was instead asked to think about the welfare of the school being an ex-student and asked to continue. They expressed their inability to pay higher because of the lack of collection of fees. She quit the school after almost a month and a half. On Miss H’s exit, some other teachers commented that the owner generally likes to observe the teacher for a month or two and then increase the salary. Others who newly joined were also not informed about their salaries. Another teacher, Mr. K. who joined at the same time with Miss. H, during his interview with the owner, told him that he must be paid at least nine thousand since he teaches Maths and Science in higher classes. The owner didn’t confirm at that time but left it unanswered. When salary day came, he got seven thousand which was the highest amongst all teachers. But he was disappointed as he expected more and he went to speak to the owner who assured him that after two months the salary would be increased. Mr. K. once casually joked with me that his father mocked him one day asking him to leave the job by saying that ‘Where is the proof that he works in the school’, pointing to the lack of a written contract. Another teacher Mr. G, 29, who taught science and maths told the owner that he won’t work for less than 5 thousand, thereby indirectly setting his own salary. It must be noted, however, that although the salaries can be considered low since

they are less than minimum wage, in that local economy that was the prevalent rate and therefore was normalised.

The salaries were not only low but they remained stagnant at the same time. There was no increase in salary for many years for the senior teachers. The justification provided by the management was that there is difficulty in collecting the monthly fees and hence the inability to increase salary or even pay on time sometimes. But the worst part was that despite the low salaries which were less than minimum wage in India, there was a practice of pay cut for absentee teachers in the school. In a month, only one day of leave was allowed and if it was more than one, there was a pay cut given. The school was very strict about this and as per the teachers' attendance register, the pay was given. Although pay cuts were normalised in the school, in one case it stood out. Mr. G. whose mother expired in the month of July and was unable to attend school for many days, and for whom there was a visit by the teachers of the school to his hometown in Barshala¹⁹, as is the social custom in India to enquire about the well-being of the family, expressed disbelief that the school gave him a pay cut once he re-joined the school and received his salary. This is in spite of the fact that the school showed so much concern²⁰ for him by having some teachers visit his hometown which was more than 100 kms away from Guwahati. Mr. G. however, continued to work even after the pay-cut, unlike Miss. H.

The less-than-minimum-wage pay which remained stagnant for years plus the pay cuts for availing leaves above the prescribed quota does not mean that teachers had it easy inside the school in terms of work. They were, in fact overworked. Classes started at 9 am and ended at 2 pm with a half an hour lunch break at 12 pm. This was from Monday to Friday while on Saturday classes got over by 12 pm. In total there were six periods in a day (four on Saturday) and all teachers were assigned five classes (of 45 mins each) with only one class off. So, on average, one teacher taught about 3.75 hours every day. That might not seem a lot, but five classes a day takes much effort. Teachers would often talk about taking five classes at a stretch and not getting any rest in between. Often, they

¹⁹ Fictional name given to his hometown

²⁰ It must be noted that the visit to the person's home was arranged by the teachers themselves because they wanted to support him during his difficult times. The school did not initiate it. When the teachers informed the school authorities, it was encouraged.

would discuss amongst themselves that they should tell the management (the owner) about it; and that they should get at least two off classes every day. This was, however, never discussed with the owner. Actual realities were worse than this. Since there were few teachers for some subjects and every once in a while, one of the teachers would be absent, in reality, those teachers present in the school ended up taking all six classes in a day. This was a regular occurrence in the school²¹. But teachers had no choice, they had to fill in for absentee teachers since no classroom cannot be left unattended as per strict instructions of the owner.

Apart from the everyday workload where teachers didn't get any rest in between classes, they also had to take on additional responsibilities for which there was absolutely no pecuniary compensation. This was because, since the school operated as per market principles where its survival depended on its ability to get and retain students, teachers were expected to do more than just teach. They also had to advertise for the school, spread the word etc. although they didn't have much say in any of these. This is an example of de-professionalisation of teachers' work, which in very broad terms refers to 'the shift from professional to non-professional status' and to the loss of 'unique occupational qualities' (Kritzer, 2001).

5.5.2 Teacher retention and replacement

The school as an organisation becomes stable only when there are permanent teachers who provide that stability. In this school, there were around 5-6 female teachers who were more like the permanent set of teachers. One of them has been with the school for around 10 years and she taught in the pre-primary section. The others were 4-5 years old in the organisation and taught in the middle standards. It was seen that these teachers took the lead in many of the activities - be it fees collection, guardian meets, or observing some events. If some student's parents had not come after school, some of them would wait with the student. All these extra responsibilities were shared among these teachers. But it is not to say that they were very happy with the school. Some of them would

²¹ Since I was the proxy teacher, I experienced this first hand. But other regular teachers also filled in for absentee teachers, thus taking all six classes in a day

constantly criticise the management. But despite their criticisms, they were mostly concerned with improving the school. It was no wonder that when one of them decided to move to the nearby JB, called BMYJB, the owner took great pains to bring her back.

One of the teachers, Miss. M. a female aged around 30, who taught Social Science and Assamese, didn't come to school after the summer vacation. Speculations were that she had joined BMYJB. She did. It was confirmed by some other teacher working in that school to one of the teachers there. The teacher had been working in the present school for close to seven years for what one could say, a meagre salary of 3-4000. Her leaving left the management unnerved. She was a senior teacher in terms of the time spent in the school and was an active member in the management of the school, at least unofficially. Some other teachers mentioned how the owner would make her do other kinds of work including personal work at home.

When she left, there were efforts to make her come back. As told by other teachers, the owner and wife visited her house to request her to come back. Then she was invited to their home for negotiations that went over 3 hours during dinner. All kinds of steps were taken by the owner to get her back. Meanwhile the owner's wife, i.e. the principal spoke about increments for other teachers. But they seemed to be mere promises. But nonetheless, it worked. Miss. M. came back after about a week or so. During my conversations with her about this episode, she said that the owner had promised her a salary that the other school was going to pay her. She also mentioned 'iman dangor manuhe ejone koise, olp beya o lage' (such a big man has requested, it feels bad). The point was that it was very difficult for her to say no to the owner who was a government officer and also because the school was like family to her. But her coming back did not mean that she wouldn't try for better opportunities later on. She said that she recently applied for a post in a private English school called XYZ Public School (Assamese teacher post) but missed out. Someone slightly better than her in terms of qualifications got the job. She was also looking out for government jobs as they are more secure and better paying. The owner, however, was ok with a teacher getting a government job, and even encouraged it but if a teacher migrated to a school that was in competition then he didn't like it. This episode revealed the intensity of competition between these schools. It

showed that in a zero-sum game, things can even get personal. Such desperate measures were necessary to ensure the survival of the school. There were efforts to make the senior teachers stick around to ensure the stability of the school.

But it's not like the management took such steps for all the teachers. In this case, since she was associated with the school for so long, the management made efforts to bring her back. In other cases, the teachers were simply replaced, whenever and if it is possible. During my brief stay and the months following it, seven teachers had left the school. Except for one, almost everyone else left owing to their issues with salary and management.

Mr T, who taught Maths in the senior grades, officially left due to personal reasons but he was also not happy with the management. Most others had issues with management. But the interesting part was that except for English for which there was a shortage of teachers, the owner brought in replacements in a very short time span. When the science teacher was about to leave, a replacement was brought in even before the teacher had left. It was as if the owner had a reserve pool of teachers ready to fill in when the need arose. The school functioned in the old-fashioned way through the network of the owner. Caste and kinship ties as well as acquaintances from earlier times all came in handy during such times. Also, former students of the school who were now graduates and looking for a job were roped in when teachers were required. This allowed the owner to keep the salaries low. For most teachers with no experience, it was 3-4 thousand and not more. The reserve pool made it possible. Also, the fact that during initial discussions with teachers, the owner does not generally reveal the salary that is going to be paid. The teachers are often kept wondering as to what the salary would be. They expect it to be decent but are often shocked on salary day. Then some of them leave but because of the availability of cheap labour, they are easily replaced. English teachers, however, were hard to find.

The above sections reveal a contradiction in the working of the school. One is that teachers didn't stick for long and there was a teacher shortage for some subjects. But at the same time, they were easily replaced. How is it possible that there was a teacher shortage when teachers were easily replaced? First of all, the teacher shortage was only

for a few subjects such as English, Maths and Science at higher grades. For others, they were easily replaced. The expansion of the public school system has led to a burgeoning number of educated youths who are looking for employment opportunities. To become a teacher in elementary classes, a minimum qualification is needed and individuals are ready to join such small schools, thus ensuring a steady supply of teachers at least for teaching the lower grades. But for subjects that require some additional qualification, it is hard to find teachers. The gendered aspect of this local economy also deserves a mention. Most of the teachers were females in this school as well as in other similar schools. Many women join such small schools as a means of keeping themselves engaged and not for the money. In patriarchal societies, women enjoy the privileges of not having to be the breadwinner of the family. With such privileges in place, women often are homemakers. But compared to being a homemaker, teaching in a school is considered respectable by traditional standards. So, instead of staying home, many women join schools to keep themselves engaged as well as for the respect that comes with being a teacher. And because many women are willing to do that, there is an oversupply of such labour, especially for elementary grades. This also has a bearing on the salary and the owner can keep it low due to the availability of surplus labour. This was mentioned by one of the male teachers who taught Maths in the higher grades. He said that “the reason such schools have more female teachers and men are hired only for some subjects is because women can be kept at a low salary since they don’t do it for the salary”. So, it was not surprising that some female teachers have been working there for many years for such a lower salary. And their sticking around the school provides stability to the school.

5.5.3 Teacher stability - tuitions inside the school

Although the school did not pay much and provided very little extra benefits to the teachers, it however, allowed other means of benefiting. There was a practice of allowing teachers to take tuitions inside the school after school hours. Tuition here refers not to the payment for school attendance, rather to the payment that is made to the tutor who takes extra classes for the student either at the student’s home or in his/her own place. Although most teachers took tuitions to supplement their income, not everyone took it inside the school. Only a few teachers did. This practice, which I found quite strange,

was common in some other schools as well. This seemed to be an incentive for teachers to stick to the school. So, although teacher salaries were very less, the school provided a platform to earn more by allowing its premises to be used for private service by its teachers. This incentive was given in an effort to make the teacher stick to the school which in turn would provide stability to the school. It did not always work but it may be the reason the school was functioning despite severe financial constraints. This trend was reported from another school in the locality, BMYJB. One of the teachers there informed me that he had been in the school from the very beginning and that he had been taking private tuitions inside the school for more than 15 years. The school allowed this and in return the school does not charge anything except a nominal amount for using chalk and electricity etc.

In the current school, two teachers indulged in that practice. The teachers could use the school infrastructure and take tuitions without any hassles. The interesting part is here, students from other schools were also allowed. The school management therefore provided an earning opportunity to teachers although they themselves paid very low salaries. Since there was a problem of teacher shortage, such incentives gave a good economic reason for the teachers to stay in the school. The catch, however, was that the owner got very upset if let's say, a teacher who left the school took tuitions from among the school students. This of course couldn't be inside the school since the teacher won't be associated with the school then. In such cases, when a teacher continued to take tuitions with students from the school, the owner would say something unpleasant to the teacher over the phone and also might coerce the guardians to not allow tuitions with teachers who had left the school. It seemed that the management was very supportive of the teachers but only till they were part of the school. This again reflects aspects of the competitive nature of these schools. Some of the teachers, like Mr. K. lamented having to work so hard (5-6 hrs) for such a low salary, but at the same time, he also claimed that without the school he wouldn't get tuitions. The school provided the platform to earn more, although the school paid less itself.

5.5.4 Spreading the word

The competition among the schools lead to the school innovating diverse ways to promote the school and maintain the public relations. While banners were sometimes used (visual advertising is mentioned in the next chapter), most of the advertisements were done personally. During my conversations, some teachers complained that they were asked to go to existing students' homes to spread the word, often with an emphasis on the fact that they have Science, Maths and English teachers. Generally, there was a shortage of teachers in these subjects and teachers were encouraged to tell parents and guardians that they do have good teachers. This was not to get new students but to retain existing ones. Also, the younger siblings of the students were encouraged to be in the same school. Since many schools compete for the same students, the competition was intense. Here, it must be mentioned that such visits were actually meant to inquire about the student and academic performance etc, and so on. But under the garb of this, there was subtle promotion of the school and was an attempt to spread the word with a personal touch. Social media platforms were also used to promote the school but there again, it was more personal. The publicity was done within the network of the teachers, management and so on. It was not general, unlike a website.

The most important day for any private school is of course the day of the declaration of the matriculation results. And the schools don't let go of any chance to show that they are doing well. Just like the major schools that fill the newspapers and news channels with advertisements displaying their results, small schools also don't let go of such opportunities. In this school, during the month of June, the results of the matriculation were out. and they were quite good by locality standards. Out of 24 students that appeared, seven got 1st division, ten got 2nd division, two got 3rd division and five failed the exam. All this was fine but the school tweaked the results slightly and made misleading claims. After the results were declared, there was a notice displayed outside the school highlighting the one student who almost secured a state rank and scored a perfect 100 in Maths. The five students who failed were not mentioned. This would have been understandable, after all, no one likes to display their failures. But the next day, there was a news item published in two or three local Assamese newspapers where the

school claimed 100% pass percentage in the exams. The number of distinction holders, start marks holders and even 1st division holders were exaggerated. This of course was misleading. Not mentioning the students who failed is one thing and making false claims that everyone has passed is another. Such news items were very important as it allowed the school to showcase their better academic performance and results. After all, the schools compete for the same bunch of students and parents definitely take academic performance into account when choosing schools. Things got more intense, however, when the principal wanted the teachers to take out a *padjatra* (a walking rally) where they would have highlighted the matric results and also the school in general within the neighbourhood. But because of the misleading claims that were published in the newspaper, some teachers were upset and refused. Also, they didn't want to do the rally anyway. The rally never took place and was cancelled.

Rallies are very useful tools for showcasing things in general. In Assam, it's quite common. The school also wanted to use the rally but it didn't work out. These rallies work because they are confined to a small locality and that is the target audience for the school. Although it did not work out this time, there was a rally organised during Independence Day. As part of the Indian government's Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav plans, all schools were encouraged to celebrate Independence Day in a grand manner. In this school as well, there was a three-day celebration. There was some poetry recitation, reading, writing competitions held and so on, prizes were given etc. On the Day (15th August), the school decided to have a *padjatra* (a rally) (Image 5). As teachers, we reached the school early in the morning to take part. Many students turned up although some were absent and they were ready with their tri-colours in hand. The rally began at around 8 am in the morning and it was in the neighbourhood, covering a couple of kilometres. The young students were very enthusiastic and were screaming 'Bharat Mata ki', 'Vande Mataram', 'Jai Hind' etc throughout the rally. Although it might seem to be an innocuous rally at first, the rally allowed the school to project itself in the neighbourhood as an ideal school, with values and *Sanskar* (moral upbringing). And it was on full display in the neighbourhood from where the present students come from and future students are likely to come. It was good for the visibility as well as publicity of the school. The other schools however, did not take out any rallies as such. It was only this

school in that neighbourhood and that made it stand out. Here the advertising was not blatant, but more subtle, under the guise. The program ended with a flag hoisting and a lecture by the principal and her distributing the prizes.

Another event where the school got to highlight itself was during Teachers Day (5 September) celebration in the school. While this day is a big event in any school across India, here as well it was observed with a lot of enthusiasm. From the point of view of projecting itself as an ideal school committed to teaching students in the mother tongue, it was a good opportunity. There were many guests invited, including some senior retired government school teachers, some senior ex-teachers from the school, guardians and so on. During the speech by the owner, he mentioned the challenges they faced during Covid-19 and asked for the continuous support of the guardians so that the school could do well in the future as well. He mentioned their future plans of building a community centre by converting the garage area, to make sports facilities available to the students etc and so on. One of the parents of an ex-student donated sports goods worth 1.5 lakh to the school. Such donations which are very common in rural areas, can be seen here as well. Again, the emphasis was on keeping the trust and faith of the guardians intact. It was also like advertising but more focused on retaining students rather than getting new ones. Survival of the school by retaining students, rather than acquiring new students, was therefore, a top priority.



Image 6, 7: The padyatra by school students on the occasion of Independence Day. These are useful means for showcasing the school that leads to increased visibility in the neighbourhood. Source and pic credits: Self-clicked.

5.6 The indirect competition with the market leader

Generally small schools are in competition with other smaller private schools (both of Assamese medium as well as English medium) in the locality since most of these schools are neighbourhood schools. But all small JB's are also in indirect competition with the AJB, the dominant player in the field, with students. This is the field of JB's. In the city of Guwahati there are around 50-60 JB's. Among the smaller JB's, it is common for movement of students from one JB to another located in the same neighbourhood. But there is also a trend where the best students from smaller JB's go to the AJB later on during their school journey. This is a common occurrence. The AJB from time to time advertises about admission in senior grades as per the vacancy. In the higher grades there are limited seats that are sometimes available. The bright students from smaller JB's or even other private Assamese schools appear for the exam and if selected they migrate to the AJB. This incident happened with one of the students in the school where I was doing my fieldwork. The student was of grade 8, the first boy in the class. He was bright, was sincere and what one might call a good student. Compared to his peers he was from a relatively better class background. His father was a PWD contractor. Due to his middle-class background, he had more economic and cultural capital and had more exposure to things in general. For example, he had a computer at home while no one among his classmates had such a gadget. This student was also more enthusiastic about learning English, he had higher dreams like getting a seat in an IIT etc. Since he was the best in the class, he was given adequate attention by the teachers since some of them were hoping that he would get a ranking in board exams. The student, however, was not so happy with the teaching overall since there were absentee teachers, new teachers coming and going etc. During my talks with him, when asked about absentee teachers and the frequent movement of teachers from the school, he mentioned how they as students felt disheartened and lost hope.

Eventually, when the opportunity came, he appeared in the entrance exam, got through and now has joined the AJB from this year onwards, i.e., from grade 9. Such incidents are not uncommon. During my survey of schools, one of the principals of another small JB mentioned how their best students would leave their schools and go to AJB when they

reach higher grades. Principals, teachers and others have a lot of hope when it comes to their bright students since a lot depends on their matric results. After all, these are private schools and perceptions about schools are considerably affected by their matric results. In such a small school, even if one student secures a state ranking, the reputation of the school receives a boost. Unfortunately for the smaller JBs, sometimes they lose their best and brightest students to the dominant player, the AJB. In the case of this student of grade 8 who shifted to AJB this year, I as a teacher might have influenced him although I never explicitly asked him to.

During my discussions in the classroom, we sometimes discussed that smaller schools like theirs had a problem of teacher retention. Teachers would come and go and students sometimes faced issues adjusting to new teachers etc. I would tell them that in bigger schools such problems are rare; there are dedicated teachers for all subjects, there are all kinds of facilities, be it sports or others, proper infrastructure etc. The student probably was influenced by my words and he thought about getting into a better school. I am not trying to claim that my words alone influenced him. He had such thoughts and probably the discussion I had with them in the classroom gave him more confidence to think on those lines. This was more or less confirmed when his mother called me up for a meeting about his future to their home. Although I could not make it to their home, I had a discussion with him and his mother about his future more than once. I told him that the decision is his entirely. I only gave a perspective about the pros and cons of a bigger school. The student eventually decided to try for the AJB and he was successful. This incident shows the competitive field of the JBs. The small schools are at a disadvantage because they generally have only a handful of bright students and even these students sometimes migrate to other better schools.

5.7 Competition and increase in the field size

The competition among the schools can also lead to an increase in the number of schools. Many new schools come up due to internal power struggles. It was not seen in the case of this school but among its competitors. The CNJB school which is one of the direct competitors of KGFZJB, in the year 2023, broke into two schools. The former owner,

who had sold the school to the land proprietor, came back and started his own school with a new name. As a result, almost half of the students went to this school. A significant chunk of those students came to the present school, KGFZJB and the rest remained there. Such developments can also change the fortunes of these small schools. In this case, KGFJB benefited immensely from the flight of students. When I visited the school after almost a year, the school had an increase of almost 100 students and I could see the school in a new shape, teeming with life due to increased student strength. The fact, however, remains that such developments can also lead to an increase in number of the schools themselves.

In another incident, the former Maths teacher of the school had a significant student following. This teacher was ousted from the school on the suspicion of some fraudulent activity. The teacher joined another JB (not among the three mentioned here but a different one), let's name it ZZJB. When he went to that school, some of the students followed him. He stayed there for a couple of years but was expelled from that school as well due to unknown reasons. When that happened, the teacher attempted to start a new JB. Many of the students followed him there because in the new school, he offered admission at cheaper prices. Whether this new school survives or not, only time will tell. But it is important to note that this kind of development can also lead to the setting up of new schools, and not necessarily for helping the cause of the Assamese language.

5.8 Conclusion - competitive markets and language politics

This chapter has looked at school competition and its nature. When the school as a business organisation is examined, it is seen that as a small business, it struggles. The lower-class clientele of the student population results in a massive challenge to collect fees on time which affects its everyday functioning. The school has to come up with innovative means to collect the fees like the use of dedicated templates that are sent to the parents of the students. Thus, much of its energies are diverted to activities like these. By virtue of being a low-fee private school where the collection of fees is quite a task leads to challenges in paying teacher salaries on time since there is no additional financial support. The teacher salaries are low and despite that, teachers are given pay cuts if they

are absent for more than their allotted days. The market competition leads to the school using various tactics for spreading the word about the school, such as rallies and home visits by the teachers. It is also seen that all the JBs are in indirect competition with the market leader, the AJB and sometimes lose their brightest students to them. The market competition is brutal and leads to the energies of the school being diverted to ensure its survival. The main argument of the chapter is that competitive markets affect the functioning of the school considerably thus forcing the school to focus on its survival rather than its ideological goals. The argument is in line with the last chapter is that there is a contradiction between the position of the school in the local market and in its quest to provide quality education in Assamese language. The school has limited resources and most of its energies are directed towards survival of the firm. But nonetheless, it does ensure in its limited capacity, to help the cause of Assamese language by making the school survive. The fact, however, remains that market forces now operate more strongly than ever. This is amply demonstrated in the case of the many new JBs that have come up with the sole intention of tapping into the growing aspiration among lower classes to acquire private education.