

Working Paper Series

**Educational
Development in
Assam: A Policy
Perspective from
Independence to the
Present**

14

**Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social
Change and Development
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Educational Development in Assam: A Policy Perspective from Independence to the Present

1. Introduction

The progress in education and literacy development in Assam can be traced back to the early historical period. The practice of *tantra shastra* was found in ancient times; however, it did not concern itself with imparting knowledge on the world view of life. From the epigraphic and literary sources, it can be remarked that the ancient education system was imparted in the *guru-grihas* and Sanskrit *tols* (Chakravarty, 1989). Realization of higher ends in life was one of the primary objectives of education which greatly revolves around moral and spiritual aspects of life. The aim of education in the medieval period remained almost the same. The curriculum taught in the educational institutions of medieval Assam included learning of *Sanskrit, Dharma shastra, Nyaya philosophy and Jyotish shastra* (Choudhury & Dutta, 2013). The advent of the *Brahmanical order* and the invasion of the Mughals during the Ahom rule gradually saw the establishment of *tols* and *moktaps* in Assam. Shankaradeva, the great 15th-century saint-scholar of Assam, played a crucial

role in shaping the educational and cultural landscape of the state. Shankaradeva established Namghars (community prayer halls) and Satras (monastic institutions) across Assam, which served as centers for religious education. These centers were not just places of worship but also provided education in music, literature, dance, art, and philosophy. Shankaradeva's teachings led to the development of literary works, including the Bhakti texts and dramas, which became foundational to the cultural and educational identity of Assam. The formal education imparted in Tols, Pathsalas, or Chatrasalas was not widespread as to cover all sections of the population. It was mainly confined to the upper strata of society, especially to the Brahmins, the Kayasthas & the Kalitas. There is no evidence on record that students belonging to other castes were debarred from admission to schools, but the number of students coming from other castes was probably very much limited. Education appeared to have been the privilege of the male sex, but the female, though didn't attend schools, was taught at home to read & write in the educated & well to do families, like in other parts of India. With the arrival of Muslim rule during the Sultanate period in India, the traces of Islamic education were also found where Madrassas (Islamic schools) were established in Assam, particularly in the lower Brahmaputra valley, where students received education in Islamic studies, Arabic, Persian, and literature¹².

School education for the masses was introduced in Assam by the American Baptist missionaries with the advent of the East India Company in 1826. Prior to this, Mr. David Scott, the East India Company representative in Assam tried to promote indigenous system of education. It started with the opening of eleven schools, mostly in lower Assam and one in Garo Hills for the expansion of primary education (Choudhury & Dutta, 2013). It offered jobs to the passing out students under the British Administration. Scott's principle was to retain the old system as far as possible and implement new rules as little as possible. As a result, the old 'Paik' and 'Khel' system was retained in Upper Assam³. However, these were replaced by the modern education system by the Company in subsequent years. Furthermore, the first secondary school was set up in Guwahati in 1835 by the colonial rulers. Christian missionaries on the other hand, played a crucial role in the language development and spread of education among the tribal people in remote areas. Also,

¹ https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/14830/1/the_assam_madrassa_education.pdf

² <https://core.ac.uk/reader/144511255>

³ https://elcmentary.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/elemenataryedu_... Historical development of Elementary Educa%20-%20

the roles of Rev Nathan Brown, Oliver Cutter and Miles Bronson are significant in the standardization of the Assamese language through periodicals like *Arunodoi* and "Dictionary in Assamese and English". In this way, school education in Assam expanded slowly and steadily with the combined efforts of the British Government, Christian Missionaries, and the local bodies⁴. As a result, the number of educational institutions for General Education rose to 1293 with an enrolment of 31462 by the year 1875.

In 1926, the first primary Education Act of Assam was passed. It entrusted the responsibility of implementation of free compulsory education for the children in the age group 6 to 11. During the 1940s, the school education in Assam suffered seriously under the influence of military movements, which adversely affected the academic scenario. Moreover, the decrease in government expenditure on education demoralized the teachers and students in Assam. After independence, the Assam Primary Education Act, 1947 was passed by the provincial legislative to provide free, compulsory and universal education. Education for backward groups of people, especially the hill people, received attention, and a number of schemes were prepared in connection with the Post War Education Development Plan. The provincial government of Assam attempted to shift the responsibility for introducing primary education from local authorities to Sub-Divisional School boards. After a few years, the Assam Basic Education Act 1954 was introduced according to the recommendation of the Zakir Hussain Committee Report⁵ to provide for the development, expansion, management, and control of basic education with a view to introducing gradually universal, free, and compulsory basic education in the state. The real concept and spirit of basic education, as envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi under four components viz. craft, art, health, and education, was not very successful in Assam. The pedagogic problem, along with the absence of trained teachers, brought the Gandhian vision to a halt. Therefore, another attempt was made by the Assam Elementary Education Act of 1962 to introduce universal, compulsory, and free elementary education in Assam. A major reason for repealing the earlier Act is the passing of the Assam Panchayat Act, 1959, which required primary education to be accommodated within the new decentralized structure. This act made the Gaon Panchayat responsible for the management and control of primary education in Assam. This new Act replaced the earlier phrase 'primary' with 'elementary'

⁴ In 1882, Indian Education Commission (Hunter Commission) entrusted the responsibility of primary education to the local bodies.

⁵ https://gargaoncollege.ac.in/pdf/publications/1/pub_more/53.pdf

and catered to school education up to class VIII. However, some administrative infirmities led to the repeal of this Act within six years and the promulgation of the Assam Elementary Education Act, 1968. Furthermore, in view of the promulgation of the Gauhati Municipal Corporation Act, 1969 and Assam Panchayat Raj Act 1972, created administrative problems on jurisdictional issues and hence the Assam Elementary Act, 1968, was replaced by the Assam Elementary Education Provincialization Act, 1974. As there were no specific rules and procedures for teachers' qualification and their recruitment process, the subsequent Assam Elementary Education Provincialization Rule, 1977, and later introduced the Assam Elementary Education (Provincialization) (Amendment) Rules, 2005, to fulfill the need. Furthermore, to decentralize educational planning at the district level, the Government of India formulated the "District Primary Education Programme" (DPEP) scheme in 1993. It was launched in Assam in the year 1994- 95 to achieve the goal of universalization and to work for the quality improvement of Elementary education.

So far, as secondary education is concerned, its administration was initially supervised by Gauhati University, although the Department of Public Instruction ran the administration till 1962⁶. In 1962, the Assam Secondary Education Act came into force for the establishment of a Board of Secondary Education to regulate, supervise and develop Secondary Education in the State of Assam. Henceforth, the High School Leaving Certificate Examination and Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination were conducted by a board called the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA). Thus, the period 1960-70 marked some notable policy changes in primary and secondary education.

In 2001–2002 by the Government of India, in collaboration with local and State governments, introduced Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a holistic, integrated, mission-driven flagship programme covering the entire nation. It is also known as the "Education for All" or "Each One Teach One" movement. In order to implement Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in Assam, the Axom Sarba Siksha Abhiyan Mission (A.S.S.A.M.) was created in 2001 as a society registered under the Registration of Societies Act, 1860⁷. However, only framing a scheme or a mission is not sufficient;

⁶<https://righttoeducation.in/sites/default/files/The%20Assam%20Secondary%20Education%20Act%201961.pdf>

⁷<https://gandhimargjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Volume-45-Issue-1-April-June-2023.pdf#page=68>

the implementation of the scheme is the deciding factor. After the enactment of the RTE Act, 2009, the Axom Sarba Siksha Abhiyan Mission (A.S.S.A.M.), State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), and Directorate of Elementary Education, Assam, have been designated as the "Implementing Authority of the Act. The Act provides a justifiable legal framework that entitles all children in the age group of 6-14 years, free and compulsory admission, attendance, and completion of elementary education. Since then, the Assam Government, with the assistance of the Implementing Authorities, has been taking various initiatives to successfully implement the scheme, considering its objectives and vision. Some of the outcomes of the implementation efforts include: WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) programme to stimulate health and education among children, inclusive education programme with the objective of imparting education to all categories of children, special training programme to children who have never attended school or who have dropped out and Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) to select the appropriate and eligible teachers capable of teaching students at different levels⁸.

In light of all these gradual efforts, it was observed that despite the expansion of government-run schools in Assam, the number of non-government schools rose faster pace. From 11935 in 2005, the number of non-government schools increased to 14996 in 2006. Therefore, to regulate their establishment and management, the government of Assam promulgated the Assam Non-Government Educational Institutions (Regulation & Management) Act, 2006, in 2007. Accordingly, the proportionate share of the private schools in the total schools in the State increased from 12.3% in 2008-09 to 16.5% in 2009-10. The gradual decline in the quality of education due to paucity of trained teachers and availability of teaching aid tools in the government schools is identified as one of the prominent reasons behind this rise. However, the issue of drop out remains a major challenge with respect to elementary education in the State, despite the expansion of school coverage in terms of area and population.

Finally in 2017, to improve the quality of school level education Government of Assam, planned to implement 'Gunotsav', an initiative first introduced by the Government of Gujarat. Gunotsav is an important quality enrichment programme with better learning results, which is intended to evaluate the students and the schools to improve the elementary level of education. It is a joint effort of the Assam

⁸ ibid vi

Government, SSA, SCERT, and the Directorate of Elementary Education. After completing three consecutive phases, the program could not be continued due to COVID-19. In total, five rounds of Gunotsav have already been conducted in the academic years 2017, 2018, 2022, 2023, and 2024 in all districts of the state⁹.

Thereafter, keeping in tune with the New Education Policy of 2020, the Chief Minister of Assam in November 2021 informed the press that the Assam Cabinet had decided to overhaul the education policy of the State, whereby schooling shall be made a 15-year process. It shall comprise four categories: foundation, preparatory, primary, and senior secondary. The updated syllabus for the new pattern shall be introduced from April 2023. Thus, it can be well stated that the Assam Government has decided to welcome the initiative of the Central Government in this regard.

In response to these profound changes, this study aims to discuss the major policy initiatives taken by the government of Assam since 2016 till 2025 under the lens of access, equity, and quality. Also, it discusses the evolution of national policies related to education in India. It utilises secondary sources like journals, budget speeches, and government reports to gather data for analysis. Followed by the introduction section, the subsequent sections include the evolution of national education policies in India, followed by the regional policies of different states. Thereafter, it records the initiatives undertaken by the government of Assam, followed by analysis, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Evolution of National Education Policies in India

2.1 The Foundation: Nation-Building and Access (1947 - 1980s)

Education, a social development indicator for a nation, serves not only as an engine of intellectual growth but also as the crucible in which human societies are transformed. The cultivation of critical thinking through education functions as a transformative mechanism that propels humanity into dynamic, innovative, driven civilisations. The pioneering work of T. W. Shultz in 1961 and further by G. S. Becker asserted that economic development has been achieved by countries only through substantial investments in human capital. Moreover, income inequality is positively related to inequality in education to a great extent. Theoretical frameworks, notably Human

⁹https://ssa.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/ssam_medhassu_in_oid_5/this_comm/revised_general_and_administrative_guidelines_gunotsav_2025.pdf

Capital Theory and New Endogenous Growth Theory, emphasized the imperative of sustained investment in human resources, research, and development to fuel societal as well as economic expansion.

The dawn of Indian independence in 1947 presented a nation brimming with potential yet shackled by a profound educational crisis, with a literacy rate languishing at a mere 18.3% with a staggering 8.86% female literacy rate (Census of India, 1951). The implementation and formulation of educational policies was a very challenging task for Abul Kalam Azad as the first education minister of independent India, given the preoccupying problems related to economic recovery and rehabilitation of those displaced by partition. Therefore, it was natural that education and other such areas received less attention at that time. However, the nascent republic identified education not merely as a social service but as the fundamental bedrock upon which a unified, modern, and sovereign nation would be built for the future. Consequently, the core theme that defined the educational landscape from 1947 through the 1980s was the formidable dual objective of establishing a unified national system and achieving mass literacy. This was the era when the foundation was built, where the primary struggle was to create a holistic framework of education to commence the first crucial step to send millions of children to the schoolhouse door to ensure primary education. This was unequivocally articulated in the Constitution of India under Article 45 of the Directive Principles of the State policy in 1950, which witnesses the constitutional vision for this monumental endeavour. It served as the nation's moral and ideological guiding star till date. It directed that "The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years¹⁰." This clause was not merely a policy suggestion but a constitutional imperative that set the ultimate goal by establishing the state's clear responsibility towards universal education and framing it as a non-negotiable prerequisite for democratic participation and economic development. This ten-year deadline proved to be overly optimistic. However, its enduring power lay in creating a permanent and unwavering benchmark against which all future government efforts would be measured, constantly pulling the national agenda back to the cause of mass literacy. Therefore, after independence, considering the state of education in the country, elementary education was given priority in the first Five-Year Plan, while in the second plan it was shifted to higher and technical education. The reason stems from the fact that in the second and third five-year plans, emphasis was on industrial

¹⁰ <https://www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf1/part4.pdf>

and technological development, which requires technically trained manpower in the country.

However, a constitutional vision required a concrete architectural plan, and this was provided by the seminal work of the Kothari Commission (1964-66). The Commission's report, entitled "Education and National Development," was arguably the most comprehensive and holistic examination of India's educational needs. It directly led to the formulation of the first National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1968. Its most enduring contribution to the project of structural unification was the recommendation of a national pattern of education: the 10+2+3 structure. This model proposed ten years of general education (split into primary and secondary stages), followed by two years of higher secondary education with scope for specialization, and culminating in three years of university education. This was a revolutionary step towards standardizing the country's wildly disparate educational frameworks, as it primarily aimed to ensure a common minimum standard and a shared educational experience for every Indian child, irrespective of their state or socioeconomic background. Given the socio-economic structure of India, it was designed to foster national integration, facilitate student mobility, and create a coherent pipeline for human resource development. Thus, the NPE 1968, built on the Kothari Commission's pillars, became the first official blueprint for a standardized, national educational system, explicitly linking educational planning to the Five-Year Plans and the broader project of national economic development. Despite its progressive visions, the policy's objectives went mostly unfulfilled for decades due to a lack of a robust plan to realize this vision.

To effectively implement this national blueprint and ensure the Centre could steer this unifying mission, a significant constitutional shift was felt necessary. Originally, education was a subject in the State List, granting primary jurisdiction to individual state governments. This fostered regional diversity but also led to vast disparities in educational development, policies, and outcomes, hindering the creation of a cohesive national system. Therefore, the pivotal 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1976 fundamentally altered this dynamic by moving "Education" from the State List to the Concurrent List. This was a decisive move towards centralizing power and fostering stronger centre-state collaboration. It empowered the Union government to legislate uniformly on educational matters across the entire country. Furthermore, it ensures the implementation of national policies like the 10+2+3 structure, setting national standards, and addressing overarching issues of quality, equity, and access in

a coordinated manner. This amendment was the critical legal enabler that transformed the NPE 1968 from a set of advisory recommendations into an actionable framework for national integration by allowing the central government to play a direct and proactive role in shaping a unified educational destiny for the nation. The tangible manifestations of this era's priorities were evident in its key initiatives. There was a strategic focus on excellence and technical manpower through the establishment of elite institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). These world-class institutions were conceived as engines of technological progress and managerial expertise, designed to produce the scientists, engineers, and leaders who would drive India's industrialization and secure its place in the modern world. They represented the apex of the educational pyramid. Simultaneously, the base of this pyramid was being constructed through various schemes aimed at expanding primary school infrastructure. Moreover, in rural and deprived areas, the central and state governments invested in building new schools and initiated programs to provide basic teaching-learning materials. While these efforts were often hampered by limited resources, with educational expenditure hovering around a meagre 0.6% of GDP¹¹ in the 1950s, they represented the essential, ground-level work of translating the constitutional mandate of Article 45 into physical spaces where learning could occur.

Key initiatives and flagship programmes that had been undertaken by the Government of India since independence to achieve the goals of these policies were Social Education (First Plan, 1951-56), Gram Shikshan Mohim (rural literacy drives, 1959), National Adult Education Programme (1978), Operation Blackboard (1987), and National Literacy Mission (1988). These efforts steadily raised the literacy rate from 18% in 1951 to 52% by 1991, and by the end of this period, the gross enrolment ratio at the primary level also improved¹². Nonetheless, a low enrolment at the secondary and tertiary levels, along with regional gaps and high dropout rates, persists.

Therefore, the story of this entire era was not one of instant, widespread success but rather of creating the necessary foundation. It was an era of constructing the very skeleton of a national system defining its structure, securing the legislative authority to manage it, and beginning the painstaking process of building institutions from the top-tier technical universities down to the foundational primary schools, all in

¹¹ https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/Public-Expenditure.pdf

¹² https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/national_data_bank/education_20nov12/1.%20School%20Enrolment%201980-81%20to%202005-06.pdf

pursuit of the overarching goal of creating a single system and placing the ideal of mass literacy at the very heart of the Indian developmental project.

2.2 The Transformation: Equity, Inclusion, and Rights (1980s - 2010)

By the 1980s, the foundational architecture of India's education system was in place, yet it was increasingly clear that the benefits of this system were distributed with profound inequality. The initial drive for national integration and mass access had failed to adequately address the deep-rooted social and economic disparities that prevented vast sections of the population from stepping into a classroom, reinforcing the poor literacy rate. The social history of India is replete with examples of discrimination based on caste and religion, which can be traced back even in the mythologies referring to Ekalavya. Therefore, a significant shift towards redressing historical injustices and, eventually, ensuring education as an enforceable fundamental right was the central issue that characterised the 1980s through 2010. This era forcefully shifted the national conversation, moving beyond the question of "How do we build schools?" to ask the more urgent and morally charged question: "Access for whom?" In order to guarantee that the educational system was not only available but also meaningful and accessible for females, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other marginalised communities, the story progressed from simple expansion to deliberate inclusion. This culminated in the historic legal recognition of education as a fundamental entitlement of every child. This opened the possibility to rise above any discriminatory restrictions. This transformative shift was first codified in policy through the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986. The NPE 1986, which marked a significant shift from its predecessor in 1968, made equity and inclusion a top priority for the country's educational strategy. It provided a clear-eyed understanding of the obstacles that the "socially and educationally backward" segments of society must overcome, calling for targeted, strategic efforts to close these gaps. The strategy advocated for a proactive, interventionist approach to remove the barriers that sustain gender inequality, with a particular focus on the educational achievement of females. It further emphasized the need for special plans for SCs and STs, including incentives for families to send their children to school, remedial programs, and the development of curricula that were sensitive to their cultural contexts. The NPE 1986 was groundbreaking because it moved the discourse from passive provision to active empowerment by acknowledging that achieving universal education required a targeted, equity-focused mission to reach those who had been systematically left behind for decades.

Hence, to operationalize this new equity-oriented vision, the government launched a series of concrete, targeted schemes. Operation Blackboard (1987) was a direct response to the poor quality of primary education. Its primary goal was to improve the learning environment, especially in rural areas, by guaranteeing that every primary school had at least two teachers and a package of essential teaching-learning materials. The Navodaya Vidyalayas initiative was started to foster talent in rural youth. It provides free, high-quality residential education from grades VI to XII and requires that a significant proportion of students be from rural families, SCs, and STs. Moreover, after realising the rigid formal system could not reach all children, especially dropouts, working children, and those in remote habitations, the Non-Formal Education (NFE) programme was expanded to provide a flexible, alternative pathway to literacy and basic education. These programs offered a more complex and diverse strategy that addressed social and qualitative impediments to learning by going beyond the physical infrastructure of brick and mortar. And also, learning through the mother tongue was emphasised with the intention of decolonising the education system.

The judicial and legislative revolution that transformed education from a governmental policy objective to an enforceable legal right, however, was considered the most revolutionary feature of this era. The Supreme Court's seminal judgement in *Unnikrishnan J.P. vs. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993) marked the beginning of this change. The Court cleverly interpreted the Directive Principle under Article 45 in conjunction with the right to life (Article 21) to declare that all children up to the age of fourteen had the fundamental right to education. This judicial activism provided the necessary impetus for a constitutional amendment.

Nearly a decade later, the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act (2002) gave this judicial principle explicit constitutional sanctity by inserting Article 21A, making the right to free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14 a justiciable fundamental right in India. This watershed moment was finally operationalized through enabling the following legislation: the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The RTE Act was a world-leading social legislation that not only guaranteed access but also specified detailed norms and standards for schools. It mandated a child-friendly curriculum, prohibited corporal punishment and screening procedures, and included the historic clause for a 25% reservation in

private schools for disadvantaged groups¹³, aiming to foster social integration. These legal triumvirate, the Unnikrishnan judgment, the 86th Amendment, and the RTE Act, represented an unparalleled shift that placed a legal obligation on the state and empowered citizens to demand education as a right.

Similarly, the top-down structure of the policy and over-reliance on centrally sponsored schemes also resulted in poor implementation at the grassroots levels. However, an attempt was made to increase local participation through decentralization and private sector involvement in the revision of the 1986 policy's framework in 1992¹⁴. The revision and its corresponding Program of Action (POA) emphasized greater local participation through the Panchayati Raj Institution by empowering Village Education Committees' Parent-Teacher Association in planning, monitoring, and maintaining schools. The POA also supported partnerships with private players for expanding infrastructure, administration, and designing curriculum to supplement governmental capacity (Ministry of HRD, POA, 1992). An argument against this change in focus and orientation was that it further fragmented the education system and increased dependence on non-state actors without a sufficient regulatory framework (Bhatty et al., 2022). As it required a massive fund to align with global standards and to create world-class institutions, the private players were brought into the field. Hence, privatisation is promoted to meet the growing demand for higher education among the middle-class people. It was implemented through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) models, allowing private entities to run educational institutions with public support or subsidies. Hence, the entry of foreign universities and the expansion of private institutions are advocated by the government. It is argued that privatisation represents a fundamental betrayal of India's original vision of education as a tool for decolonization, social justice, and national development.

¹³https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/RTE_Section_wise_rationale_rev_0.pdf

¹⁴ The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 via Part IX and 11th Schedule placed education, including primary and secondary schools, technical training, vocational education, adult education and non-formal education within local governance domain. It empowered the PRIs to support school mapping and local planning, infrastructure creation and upkeep (toilets, rooms, drinking water, boundary walls), community regulation and social audit through Village Education Committee, School Management Committee covering enrolment drives, attendance and grievance resolution, implementation support for flagship schemes, inclusion and equity functions through tracking out-of-school children, facilitating transition of girls and disadvantaged groups and basic teacher monitoring. The companion 74th Amendment similarly positions local urban bodies to support educational promotion in towns and cities.

Instead, it has become a vehicle for commercialisation, benefiting a privileged few while excluding the masses and undermining India's cultural and intellectual autonomy (Panikkar, 2011).

The flagship program that embodied the spirit of this entire era was the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001. As the primary vehicle for implementing the RTE Act after 2009, SSA was the largest-ever educational initiative of its kind that explicitly aimed at the universalization of elementary education (ages 6-14). It was an integrated programme which combined a focus on access with a deep commitment to inclusion, social justice, and community ownership. SSA poured massive investments into building new schools and additional classrooms, appointing teachers, developing teaching materials, and providing grants for school improvement. Importantly, it included targeted programs for females, children from SC/ST communities, and people with special needs, guaranteeing that the NPE 1986's equity mandate was implemented in practical, financially supported ways. The SSA aimed to ensure all children were in school by 2003, complete five years of primary by 2007, and eight years of elementary education by 2010¹⁵ by investing heavily in infrastructure. There was a thrust on infrastructure, access, availability, and inclusiveness. The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, girls' residential schools for disadvantaged blocks and funds for children with special needs, was an attempt to increase higher ratio of females over males in enrolment and bring all young children to school. Thus, SSA became the operational arm of the nation's conscience, striving to bring every last child into the educational fold. In essence, this transformative era was defined by a moral and legal awakening.

The renewed thrust on universalization of primary education was clearly reflected in the Ninth Plan, which treats education as the most crucial investment in human development. Even after all these efforts, the result was not satisfactory, as out of approximately 200 million children in the age group 6-14, only 120 million are in schools, and net attendance in the primary level is only 66 percent of enrolment. Therefore, the Eleventh Five-Year Plan continued with the emphasis laid by the Tenth Plan to achieve Universal Elementary Education for all children. In fact, it has been termed as an education plan for the country in order to achieve rapid and inclusive growth. It was a period where India confronted the exclusion embedded within its system and responded with a powerful combination of targeted policy,

¹⁵ https://dse.education.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-05/Manual_Planning_and_Appraisal.pdf

innovative schemes, and landmark legal architecture by changing the discourse from one of charity to one of right, and from access alone to access with equity.

2.3 The Modernization: Quality, Flexibility, and Future-Readiness (2010 Onwards)

After decades of fighting for inclusion and access, the Right to Education Act (RTE) was finally passed in 2009. However, it also made clear the next significant barrier to India's educational advancement. According to national assessments and international surveys, by the 2010s, when virtually universal enrolment in primary education had been largely achieved, millions of children were enrolled in school but not learning¹⁶. The core theme defining the period from 2010 onwards is, therefore, a decisive pivot towards modernization, quality, and future-readiness. This era is characterized by an urgent drive to move the system beyond its focus on infrastructural inputs and rote memorization towards fostering holistic development, critical thinking, and adaptability for the 21st century. The narrative powerfully evolved from the previous era's question of "Access for whom?" to the more complex and quality-centric question of "Access for what?"

Besides, the launching of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), 2009 aimed to expand access and improve quality, targeting a gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 75% by 2013 and 100% by 2017 in secondary level of education¹⁷. The schemes like SSA, RMSA, Mid-Day Meal, and female-specific programmes greatly expanded access in primary and secondary levels of schooling by 2010. As a result, the national literacy rate increased from 52.2% in 1991 to 72.98% by 2011, an increase of around 40%. The female literacy rate also jumped from 39.29% in 1991 to 64.63% by 2011¹⁸, with a percentage change of around 65%. By 2011-12, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) across different educational levels approached parity level, indicating a reduction in disparities across different levels of education¹⁹. Similarly, the gross enrolment ratio improved at the primary level, which was about 106.5 (males 105.8, females 107.1), and at upper primary, it was 82.0 (males 82.5, females 81.4). However, at higher secondary it was only 56.8 (males 58.8, females 54.5) and remained low in higher

¹⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/media/71801/file/Global-annual-results-report-2019-goal-area-2.pdf>

¹⁷ https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/Revised%20Draft%20%20financial%20management%20and%20procurement%20_%20FM&P_%20manual-%20comments%20invited%20%20from%20State%20Govts.pdf

¹⁸ https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/reports_and_publication/statistical_publication/social_statistics/WM16Chapter3.pdf

¹⁹ *ibid* xiv.

education by 2011-12²⁰, even after the expansion of universities and IITs. Moreover, social and regional disparities persist, with students from SC and ST communities trailing substantially in literacy and school completion.

Table 1: Reasons for drop-out

Reasons for drop-out	All India	Assam
Not interested in education	17.0	17.5
Financial constraints	21.2	27.8
Engaged in domestic activities	16.1	14.5
Engaged in economic activities	22.3	23.5
School is far off	1.5	1.4
Timings of educational institution	0.1	0.0
Language/medium of instruction used unfamiliar	0.1	0.0
Inadequate number of teachers	0.0	0.0
Quality of teachers not satisfactory	0.1	0.2
Route to educational institution not safe	0.1	0.0
Unable to cope up with studies/failure	3.6	3.1
Unfriendly atmosphere at school	0.1	0.0
Completed desired level/class	6.1	2.8
Preparation for competitive examination	1.7	0.7
Non-availability of a female teacher	0.1	0.0
Nonavailability of girls' toilet	0.1	0.0
Others	3.9	4.3
Marriage	6.1	4.2
Total	100	100

Source: NSSO 75th round, Household Social Consumption: Education, 2017-18

Post 2015, the focus of India's education policy shifted from expansion to consolidation and quality. The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign, launched in 2015, aimed to enhance quantitative growth by associating females' education with comprehensive gender empowerment. In 2018, the government integrated SSA and RMSA under Samagra Shiksha, including pre-primary to class XII (ages 3-18) and prioritising learning outcomes and digital inclusion, while maintaining free entitlements such as books, uniforms, and added new programs like NIPUN Bharat in 2021 for foundational literacy.

²⁰ *ibid* xiv.

The solution, as outlined in the ground-breaking National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, is to offer students a transformative education that equips them with the information, skills, and values they need to flourish in a quickly changing, globalised society. This modernizing shift was primarily a direct response to the identified gaps in the post-RTE landscape. While the RTE Act was remarkably successful in increasing enrolment and ensuring physical access through mandated infrastructure norms, it unintentionally created a system that was overly focused on compliance with input-based metrics such as pupil-teacher ratios, building specifications, and teacher qualifications, while paying insufficient attention to the ultimate outcome: student learning. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) consistently highlighted that a significant proportion of children in elementary school lacked foundational skills in reading and arithmetic. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a comprehensive response to this crisis of quality. It explicitly acknowledges that the foundational goals of access and equity cannot be fully realized without a concomitant focus on what children are actually learning and experiencing in their classrooms. The policy is a deliberate effort to build on RTE's success by addressing its qualitative weaknesses, ensuring that the right to education actually translates into the right to a meaningful and effective education. It mandates a fundamental shift from the prevailing culture of rote learning and content-heavy curricula to a pedagogy rooted in outcome-based learning, conceptual understanding, and the development of higher-order skills. The vision anticipates an education system that places key emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, all of which are felt to be essential in today's knowledge economy. The move away from a dogmatic, exam-led model towards a more adaptive, inquiry-led, and experiential model is expected to produce not only intellectually capable students but also rounded individuals with social, ethical, and emotional competencies.

In order to put this into action, NEP 2020 brings in dramatic structural changes. The most important is the reorganization of the curriculum and pedagogic structure into the 5+3+3+4 pattern, integrating the crucial early childhood phase (ages 3-6) into the formal schooling system while laying strong emphasis on the importance of foundational learning. Through a curriculum focused on interactive, play-based, and discovery learning, the model splits schooling into Foundational, Preparatory, Middle, and Secondary levels. Additionally, the approach proactively encourages the incorporation of vocational education from the middle level, aiming to dissolve the age-old stigma surrounding skills education and give students hands-on experience

along with many pathways to achievement. In higher education, the policy promotes a multidisciplinary approach, pulling down rigid disciplinary barriers between arts, sciences, and commerce. It argues for large, multidisciplinary universities and colleges with flexible curricula for students, multiple entry and exit points with suitable certifications, and a liberal education that broadens intellectual curiosity and well-rounded development.

Lastly, keeping in mind the drivers of the future, NEP 2020 puts high importance on technology and globalization. It calls for the strategic use of digital resources for bringing teaching, learning, and assessment to a higher level, but also warns against the digital divide. Efforts in encouraging coding and computational thinking early in life are emphasized, as well as the establishment of a National Educational Technology Forum to allow technology-enabled education ideas to be exchanged. In order to internationalize Indian education, the policy strongly promotes internationalization of education by allowing high-ranked international universities to enter India, encouraging student and faculty exchange programs, and initiating research partnerships. It also underscores the leverage of technology for multilingual learning and the development of digital stores of content in local languages.

In a critical examination of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Govinda (2020) acknowledges the policy's impressive breadth and ambitious vision to transform India into a global knowledge power. However, he argues that the document is fundamentally disconnected from the ground realities of the Indian education system. While it is rich with attractive ideas and proposals, many are resurrected from past policies without a reflective engagement with the reasons for their previous failures, such as the introduction of vocational skills and the creation of school complexes. Govinda contends that the policy operates in an "ideational world," making grandiose promises like achieving universal access from early childhood to higher secondary education that are difficult to take seriously, given the country's ongoing struggle to provide eight years of quality compulsory schooling.

A central critique is the policy's neglect of the existing system's frailties, including under-resourced infrastructure, a lack of qualified teachers, and ineffective administration. Instead of focusing on strengthening these core components, as mandated by the Right to Education Act, 2009, the NEP proposes top-down solutions like national missions and digital repositories, which are ill-suited for addressing the simple, daily task of imparting foundational literacy and numeracy in

classrooms. Furthermore, the policy treats India's education system as a monolith, failing to account for vast regional disparities and promoting a centralized, one-size-fits-all approach that overlooks the need for adaptive, state-specific strategies. Govinda concludes that by being overly idealistic and oblivious to socio-economic constraints, the NEP risks remaining merely on paper, ultimately failing to prioritize the reform of the public education system upon which the marginalized majority depends.

The transition from the University Grants Commission (UGC) to the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), as envisioned in the National Education Policy 2020, represents a significant restructuring that warrants careful consideration of its potential repercussions. While the intent to streamline regulation is clear, this shift risks diluting the core function of grant allocation and fiduciary oversight that the UGC traditionally provided. This could lead to a scenario where the crucial link between policy, funding, and institutional health becomes fragmented, potentially disadvantaging public universities that depend on structured and predictable financial support. The move may also inadvertently centralize decision-making, which could stifle the unique academic character and autonomy of individual universities and create a one-size-fits-all regulatory environment. Furthermore, replacing a long-standing institution with a new, untested architecture carries the risk of operational instability and a loss of cumulative expertise, potentially undermining the stability and financial security of the higher education sector during a critical period of transformation.

3. India's Regional Flagship Initiatives on Education

The educational landscape in India is marked by vast inter-state diversity in achievements and challenges. While national initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education (RTE) Act have improved overall enrolment, state governments have launched their own flagship education program or schemes to further promote access, equity and quality in education. One landmark intervention is the Mid-day Meal Scheme, first pioneered by the state of Tamil Nadu before the independence of India in the 1960s, to increase the primary school enrolment by providing free lunches to the children. By 2002, the scheme was implemented in all the states following a Supreme Court order, making it the world's largest school feeding program. A recent systematic review of 31 studies concluded that regular access to midday meals improves enrolment, attendance and

retention rates and is associated with lower dropout rates (Raveenthiranathan et al., 2024). Similarly, in-kind incentives like free textbooks, uniforms and stationery to students had been provided by many state governments in the 1970s and 1980s as a way of boosting enrolment among low-income families. Such in-kind support programs laid the groundwork for later conditional cash transfer schemes by addressing the immediate costs of schooling (Mandal, 2025). The Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana launched by Bihar government dramatically increased girls' age-appropriate enrolment in secondary school by 32% and reduced the gender gap in enrolment by 40% and this increase mostly took place in villages where the nearest secondary school was further away, further suggesting program's effectiveness in reducing time and safety of school attendance (Muralidharan, & Prakash, 2017). State governments like Gujarat's annual *Shala Praveshotsav* campaign have also run intensive enrolment drives and school infrastructure expansion to reach out-of-school children. Through such measures, most states achieved near universal primary enrolment by 2010. The challenge has shifted from initial enrolment to retention at upper primary and secondary levels. The states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have led in retaining students through upper primary, boosting secondary gross attendance rates over 90% where states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh have historically struggled with high dropout by Grade 10.

Equitable access for disadvantaged groups such as females, socio-economically backward classes, tribal communities, and children with special needs has been a priority for many state flagship programs. In such cases, girl-child education schemes are a prominent category that are often designed as conditional cash transfers or scholarships. The Kanyashree Prakalpa, one of the most lauded programs launched by West Bengal government in 2013 provides an annual scholarship of Rs. 1000 to adolescent girls of the age groups 13-18 years who remain in school and unmarried and a one-time grant of Rs. 25000 at the age of 18 for those who are still in education and unmarried, with the objective to reduce female dropout rates in secondary school and prevent child marriage. Studies showed that the scheme was instrumental in improving females' enrolment, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged areas; however, in terms of learning outcomes, the scheme has not shown a commensurate improvement (Mandal, 2025; Das & Sarkhel, 2023). Similar female-focused schemes in other states, including Bihar's Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana, Ladli Lakshmi scheme in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Goa, are designed to offer financial assistance to promote the birth of girl children, improve their education and health and empower their future prospects. Likewise, states with significant Scheduled Caste (SC) and

Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward classes (OBC) and minority populations have launched residential school initiatives to improve educational access and outcomes for marginalized groups. For example, state like Telangana runs hundreds of free, English medium residential schools (Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions) to provide quality education, lodging and mentorships for such groups. The outcomes of these schools were positive in board examinations and the students also outperformed in the competitive examinations of different courses/institutions like IITs, NITs, Medicine, etc. (Karunakar, 2019). Another dimension of equity is the inclusion of children with special needs (CWSNs). Under the adoption of SSA's "zero injection policy", states are to ensure education for all children regardless of disability. Studies showed that resource constraints and varying implementation means for CWSN still differ widely across states. The majority of the school authorities are not in harmony with the policy, acts and provisions provided by the government due to the non-availability of resources (Kaushik, 2018). Moreover, many states have implemented the 25% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in private schools mandated by Section 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act, indicating equity in access.

The national surveys like ASER, NAS consistently show low proficiency in reading and math among students in many states, even in higher grades. In response, several states launched flagship programs focusing on teaching learning processes, school evaluation and infrastructure upgrades. One influential model is Gujarat's Gunotsav, an annual school assessment drive, where external evaluators visit schools to assess students' learning level, co-curricular activities and infrastructural gaps, then grade the schools. The program assumes that measurement and accountability spur improvement. Following the Gujarat model, the Government of Assam implemented the same initiative with its own vision to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education in the state in 2017. Improving teaching quality and pedagogy has also been a focus. Since 2015, the educational reform in Delhi has provided a notable case of a comprehensive quality improvement strategy at the UT level. The Delhi government introduced innovative curricula such as the "Happiness Curriculum" for fostering mental well-being and emotional development in students and "Mission Buniyaad" for improving foundational learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy for students, especially in government schools. A study in Delhi's schools showed significant improvement in the foundational skills of the students who regularly attend this program, though the gains are too small to stop the gap between high-performing and low-performing students from widening, as explained by the Matthew effect (Panchal, 2024). A few northern states have recently

adopted bold quality reforms. The "Mission Prerna" launched by the Uttar Pradesh government aims to ensure all primary children achieve foundational literacy and numeracy by grade 2, aligning with the national NIPUN Bharat mission. Another best practice comes from Kerala's "Public Education Rejuvenation Mission" launched in 2016. Unlike targeted learning programs, Kerala's approach was holistic, where the government upgraded the physical infrastructure of the government schools, equipped classrooms with ICT and mobilized the community to re-embrace public schools. As a result, the curriculum, pedagogy, and learning process as a whole had undergone significant transformation under this mission as well and there was an increase in enrolment in different levels of education in the public school (Venkiteswaran & Sivadasan). The state consistently ranks top in national School Education Quality Index (SEQI) rankings (NITI Aayog, 2019), and its model of a strong public education system contrasts with states where public schools are seen as a last resort for the poor.

Discussing the essence of policy initiative and its implementation at national and regional level, the subsequent section of the study sheds light on how the present government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which came into power in 2016 rolled out a series of new initiatives along with the existing policies in order to improve the overall educational picture that the state was earlier lagging behind.

4. Education in Assam: Progress and Gaps

Like any other Indian state, Assam has a unique socio-cultural diversity. The state's policies related to education in Assam align with the national goal while understanding its own diversified requirements. After the independence of India, Assam was among the states with the lowest literacy level, owing to limited schooling infrastructure, widespread poverty, and socio-political instability. Modest gains in terms of educational development were achieved during the 1960s and 70s with the efforts of the central as well as the state government interventions, however, the socio-political instability such as the Assam Agitation in the late 1970s and 1980s, put the progress of development on hold and further halted the census operations in 1981 and leading to a stagnation of reforms. The introduction of national programmes such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1994, the Mid-Day Meal Programme in 1995, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2000, the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in 2009 marked a turning point in the late 1990s, which

led to increased investment in school infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and mid-day meal schemes. As a result, the literacy rate, which stood at a mere 18.5% in 1951, rose slowly in the 1960s and 1970s, but accelerated post-1991 reforms and finally reached 72.19% by 2011 (Census of India, 1951-2011). Complementing the central government schemes, targeted measures have also been undertaken by the Government of Assam over the years. Under the RTE Assam Rules (2011), free textbooks have been made an entitlement for students up to class VIII, and accordingly, it has been distributed to the learners of elementary-level classes of the state except in private schools. Since 2005, the Government of Assam has been providing laptops and cash awards as a reward in lieu of laptops to the meritorious students securing 1st division in the 10th state Board examination to motivate and inspire the students for better performance and to have first-hand experience with Information and Communication Technology²¹. Besides, the free bicycle scheme for female students up to Class X provided more than 4,56,000 recipients since 2012-13, aims to reduce the dropout rate of female students and to increase enrolment of females at the secondary level²². The effort is an attempt to address the high dropout rate among females after secondary level since most higher secondary level schools are located 3 km away or beyond. Distance is one of the central reasons for higher drop-out rates, especially in rural areas. Similarly, to encourage students at different levels of education, the government has launched various scholarship schemes since 2011.

As a result of the initiatives of the state, the literacy rate in Assam increased and the Gross Enrolment Ratio at the primary level approached universal levels (MHRD, GoI, 2014-15). However, this progress masked enduring challenges in retention and progression. The higher dropout rate persists, particularly at the secondary and tertiary level, and at higher education, the GER still lags behind the national average, standing at 14.8% in 2014-15 (AISHE, 2015), far below India's average

²¹ Laptops or cash awards under 'Anundoram Barooah Laptop Award Scheme' in lieu of laptops to the meritorious students securing 1st division in the HSLC and High Madrasa Examination of SEBA and 10th standard examination held under State Madrasa Education Board, Assam and Sanskrit Board Assam have been provided by the government of Assam under Department of Secondary Education since 2005. However, in 2020, government decided to provide cash award of Rs. 20000/- instead of laptops due to the difficulty in procuring laptop, as COVID-19 pandemic badly hit the supply chain. In the recent year, it has been decided to transfer Rs.15,000/- to the bank account of every eligible student who secure Star marks or 75% or more in 10th Board examination.

²² <https://education.assam.gov.in/portlets/distribution-of-ladies-bicycle>

of over 24%, indicating persistent bottlenecks in access and transition to tertiary education. However, the frequent floods in Assam have continued to disrupt school attendance, especially in hilly and Char areas (Deka & Kalita, 2024). Following the implementation of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan and Rastriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, the school infrastructures in Assam have improved, however, the availability of well-equipped school buildings is yet to be a reality for all. Increasing the number of schools does not necessarily mean improvement in school infrastructure. Such expansion may improve the state's average indicator, but regional disparities significantly persist in other facility indicators, such as student-classroom ratio, pupil-teacher ratio, drinking water provisioning, sanitation, boundary wall, etc. In addition to the geographical, natural, and infrastructural challenges in the state, socio-economic challenges such as poverty, child marriage, migration, and inadequate parental support contribute to both non-enrolment and high dropout rates.

5. State Interventions through Schemes Prior and Post 2016

The state government has pursued an extensive policy toolkit to expand access, equity, and quality in schooling and higher education. Major schemes included free textbooks for students up to Class XII and school uniforms for students up to Class X, MDM programme for students up to Class VIII, special awards and cash-for-schooling, such as laptops or cash for HSLC meritorious students, and special incentive schemes for female students, for instance, bicycles, scooters, and stipends or incentives for minority or tribal students. At the tertiary level, programmes like the Abhinandan loan-subsidy (Rs. 50,000 per student) and subsidized education loans through the Bidya Lakshmi scheme aimed to ease higher-education costs. The overall thrust was to universalize secondary and higher education under schemes like Pragyan Bharati and, more recently, Mukhya Mantri Nijut Moina (MMNM), bundling benefits such as fee waivers, textbook stipends, hostel subsidies, and mobility grants. These efforts are impressive in scope and directly correspond to SDG-4's ethos of "leaving no one behind". As a result, the state has seen progress in areas like universalisation of enrolment at the primary level, female enrolment at different levels of education, higher literacy, reduction in dropout rate to some extent, etc.

Here is a list of some of the scholarships and schemes that have been launched by the state governments prior to 2016.

1. Pre-Matric and Post- Matric Scholarship to the Meritorious BPL Students under Chief Minister's "Assam Bikash Yojana Scheme": Under this scheme scholarship are paid to the meritorious BPL Students studying in class IX and X (Pre-Matric) and class XI- XII (Post- Matric) @ Rs. 300/- and Rs. 350/- per month respectively. From the year 2015-16, the amount of scholarship has been enhanced to Rs. 400/- and 500/-. A total of 13,394 students have received the scholarship till 2015-16, with a sanction amount of 3,33,00,000/-.

2. Junior College Scholarship: Under this scheme, students studying in class XI and XII in Jr. College are provided a scholarship @ Rs. 300/- per month, securing 55% to 59% and @ Rs. 350/- per month, securing 60% and above. A total of 857 students have received the scholarship till 2015-16, with a sanction amount of 45,38,800/-.

3. Physically Disability Scholarship: Under this scheme, students having physical disability are given a scholarship @ Rs. 300/- per month studying in class IX-X and @ Rs. 350/- per month studying in class XI-XII. A total of 1016 students have received the scholarship till 2015-16, with a sanction amount of 34,10,600/-.

4. Scholarship to the Domicile students studying in Sainik School Goalpara, Assam @ Rs. 30,000/- per annum: Scholarship is provided to all the Domicile cadets of Assam studying in Sainik School Goalpara, Assam, @ Rs. 30,000/- per student per annum. A total of 1757 students have received the scholarship till 2015-16, with a sanction amount of 5,40,90,000/-.

5. Scholarship to the students of Assam studying in Rashtriya Indian Military College, Dehradun @ Rs. 30,000/- per annum: Scholarship is awarded to all the cadets of Assam studying in Rashtriya Indian Military College (RIMC), Dehradun @ Rs. 30,000/- per annum. A total of 31 students have received the scholarship till 2015-16, with a sanction amount of 8,26,500/-.

6. Scholarship to Girls' Students of Class IX to XII under Gender Responsive Budget: Under this scheme, SC/ST Girls' students are given @ Rs. 300/- per month for studying in class IX-X and @ Rs. 350/- per month for Class XI-XII. A total of 2341 students have received the scholarship till 2014-15, with a sanction amount of 69,94,400/-.

The major flagship schemes launched during the period from 2016 to 2025 are as follows-

1. Two-wheelers Scheme for female students: In the 2017-18 budget, the Assam government provided two-wheelers to the top 1,000 female students who passed the Higher Secondary Examination 2017, in order to provide better mobility for easier access to higher education institutes. Accordingly, it earmarked and allocated a sum of Rs. 5 crore in this budget (Assam Budget, 2017-18). This initiative was further extended for the 2018-19 year also and provided two-wheelers to the top 5,000 females who passed the Higher Secondary Examination 2018. For this, the government allocated a sum of Rs. 25 crore in the Budget 2018-19 (Assam Budget, 2018-19). For the Financial Year 2019-20, it provided battery-operated "e-bikes" to all females who secured 1st division or above in their higher secondary examinations for commuting to their places of higher studies. This initiative would not only empower females but also promote environmental friendliness. For this, the Government of Assam earmarked a sum of Rs. 25 crore for the same under the Transport Department in the FY 2019-20 (Assam Budget, 2019-20).

2. Pragyani Bharati Scooty Scheme: The two-wheeler scheme for female students was continued in the name of the Pragyani Bharati Scooty Scheme, which was launched in 2020 to benefit female students who secured 60% or more marks in the Class 12 Board Examination. Under this scheme, the state provided free scooters to eligible females, aiming to motivate them to pursue higher education and inspire other students preparing for board exams. The scheme is implemented by the Department of Higher Education, Assam. It had distributed scooties to 20,000 top-ranked females from the Class 12th examination during 2020-21 (Assam Budget 2020-21). The main objectives of the scheme are as follows:

- ◇ To motivate these students to pursue higher education and encourage other students who are going to appear in the examination.
- ◇ To provide females with better mobility for easier access to educational institutions without depending on anyone.

In 2022, the government introduced the Dr. Banikanta Kakati Merit Award Scheme, which was a component of the broader Pragyani Bharati Scheme, and is open to both male and female students who excel in the Higher Secondary examination. Under this

initiative, scooty was provided to males scoring 75% or above and females scoring 60% or above. The objective of the scheme is to recognize academic excellence regardless of gender and to encourage students to continue their educational journey with distinction²³.

4. Scholarship for female students belonging to minority communities: In the 2018-19 budget, the government of Assam proposed an annual scholarship of Rs. 2,000, Rs. 4,000, Rs. 6,000, and Rs. 10,000 for female students belonging to minority communities studying in Class 10th, 11th-12th, graduation, and post-graduation, respectively. These amounts would be credited into their accounts through the DBT mode simply on self-certification that they are unmarried and pursuing their education (Assam Budget, 2018-19). It had announced the scholarship scheme to support all females belonging to minority communities, to encourage and incentivise them to continue their higher education and stay on in the formal education system. Although announced in the 2018-19 Budget, the operational guidelines were finalized by the Education Department, and the scheme was officially launched in the Financial Year 2019-20. For this scheme, it had earmarked an amount of Rs. 200 crores in the 2019-20 Budget (Assam Budget, 2019-20). The scheme continued to be implemented until the Financial Year 2023-24. From 2024 onwards, it has been integrated into the Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina (MMNM) Scheme, which aims to provide broader support for females' education in the state.

5. Mobility grant to female students: In line with the announcement made by the Hon'ble Finance Minister in the Assam Budget Speech for FY 2022-23, the Government of Assam has introduced a Mobility Grant of Rs. 10,000 annually to female students studying postgraduate courses under the Pragyan Bharati scheme. The major aim of this project is to attract female students from the weaker section to continue higher education, empower women, and relieve the financial burden on their parents. The grant would be used for mobility-related expenses to enable the female to continue studying without interruption. The scheme was available to females who were regular students pursuing the first year or second year of postgraduate courses in the year 2022 in State Universities and Autonomous Colleges of Assam. The applicant must be from a family with an annual income not exceeding Rs. 5.00 lakh. The application was made by completing a specified form on the website of the Directorate of Higher Education (DHE), Assam. The student should submit the duly

²³https://directorateofhighereducation.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dhe_medhassu_in_oid_4/menu/document/scooter_guideline.pdf

filled-in application to the Registrar of the concerned university. The Registrar, after closely examining the information, would send the validated and integrated list of the eligibles to the DHE. On sanction, all such eligible students should be required to receive Rs. 10,000 per annum through the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme in their bank account. The scheme reflected the intent of the state government to promote more opportunities for women in higher education and equip them to excel academically and individually²⁴. The scheme continued to be implemented until the Financial Year 2023-24. From 2024 onwards, it has been integrated into the Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina (MMNM) Scheme, which aims to provide broader support for females' education in the state.

6. Pre-Matric and Post-Matric scholarships: In the 2017-18 budget, the government of Assam introduced a new Pre-Matric and Post-Matric scholarship scheme for SC, ST, and OBC students. For this, it had provided Rs. 35.90 crores for Pre-Matric scholarship and Rs. 204.00 crores for Post-Matric scholarships for the students of SC, ST, and OBC in the budget for 2017-18 (Assam Budget, 2017-18).

7. Abhinandan scheme: Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal launched the Assam Abhinandan Education Loan Subsidy Scheme on 26 December 2019. The objective of this scheme is to provide a loan subsidy of up to Rs. 50,000 on education loans to students pursuing higher education from good institutions. The Abhinandan Education Loan Subsidy Scheme has been started with the Housing Scheme. Under this scheme, the Government of Assam provides a one-time subsidy on loans to all students pursuing higher education through education loans. Under the Abhinandan Scheme, all major banks and all commercial banks, such as Federal Bank and HDFC, were included. The beneficiary can avail of a one-time subsidy of Rs. 50,000, provided they must be a resident of Assam, have an education loan exceeding Rs. 1 lakh, must repay 25% of their loans, and have availed the loan from commercial banks like Federal Bank and HDFC, and regional rural banks like Assam Rural Regional Bank. A total of 6,052 students have benefited from the scheme till 2020. An amount of Rs. 22 crore was credited to the accounts of the beneficiaries as a subsidy. Rs. 75 crores had been earmarked for this purpose in the Financial Year 2019-20 (Assam Budget, 2019-20). The government continued the one-time Education Subsidy Loan of Rs. 50,000. However, in 2024, the revamped version of the scheme, i.e., Abhinandan Education Loan Subsidy Scheme 2.0, was

²⁴https://directorateofhighereducation.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dhe_medhassu_in_oid_4/menu/document/image_001.pdf

launched by the Assam Government with updated eligibility criteria. Under the new guidelines, education loans classified as non-performing assets or those amounting to less than Rs. 2 lakh are not eligible for the subsidy²⁵.

8. Bidya Lakshmi Scheme: In pursuance of the announcement made in the budget speech, 2016-17, the Government of Assam has decided to provide higher education loans for the children of state government employees of all categories under the Bidya Lakshmi Scheme. The “Bidya Lakshmi” scheme, introduced in 2016-17 by the Finance (Audit & Fund) Department, Government of Assam, under the Ucha Siksha Hitoishona Achari (USHA) for Karmachari, is designed to offer low-interest higher education loans to permanent, in-service state government servants of Assam. The scheme provides loans between Rs. 5 lakh and Rs. 10 lakh at a lowered rate of interest of 4%. The employees who have up to Rs. 4.5 lakh annual income can avail 100% interest exemption for the moratorium period (one year plus course duration) under the Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme (CLSS), whereas employees with more than Rs. 4.5 lakh annual income can avail up to Rs. 10 lakh loans at 4% interest after government subvention. The loan finances tuition costs, books, computers, hardware for learning, and travel costs of foreign studies, and is accepted directly by the educational institution in a lump sum or instalments, as per its fee payment structure. No collateral and third-party guarantee are needed for loans of up to Rs. 10 lakh, and an optional life insurance cover can be bought to repay the loan. Tax rebate advantages are available under Section 80(E) of the Income Tax Act, too. The eligibility conditions are that the parent must be a regular state government servant with at least five years of residual pensionable service, have a salary account with a facility for check-off for EMI, and be the co-borrower in the loan application, as well as the child. The student has to be studying in a UGC/AICTE/Government-approved college within India or a very high-ranked institution abroad, undertaking an approved course like Engineering, Medical, Law, Management, CA, CFA, or PhD. An offline process is undertaken, and interest is charged every month while a subsidy is credited upon claim clearance. The utilization certificate has to be submitted at the end of every financial year so that terms of disbursement may be allowed²⁶.

²⁵ <https://assam.gov.in/assam-abhinandan-education-loan-subsidy-scheme>

²⁶ https://finance.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/BIDYA%20LAKSHMI%20LOAN%20FOR%20HIGHER%20EDUCATION%20OF%20THE%20CHILDREN%20OF%20REGULAR%20STATE%20GOVERNMENT%20EMPLOYEES%20IN%20ASSAM%20UNDER%20UC-CHA%20SIKSHA%20HITOISHONA%20ACHANI%20%28USHA%29%20FOR%20KARMACHARI%2C%20FILENO.%20FM.47.2016.117%2C%20DTD.21.03.2017_0.PDF

9. Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina Aasoni: The Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina (MMNM) Scheme, announced by the Hon'ble Finance Minister of Assam in the 2022-23 Budget Speech and effective from the year 2024, intends to give financial support as admission incentives to 10 lakh (one million) female students of Assam to motivate them to continue their studies at Higher Secondary, Graduation, and Post-Graduation levels. The scheme is designed with intrinsic objectives: to promote female enrolment in higher education, reduce dropouts, raise the percentage of girls educated after matriculation, improve the state's Gross Enrolment Ratio, and eliminate child marriage. The benefit of the scheme is available only to female students pursuing studies in government and venture institutions. Financial incentives are given as per the levels of study: Rs. 1,000 a month (a maximum of 10 months amounting to Rs. 10,000 a year) to students of Class 11, Rs. 1,250 a month (up to Rs. 12,500 a year) to Graduation First Year students (B.A., B.Sc., B.Com.), and Rs. 2,500 a month (up to Rs. 25,000 a year) to Post-Graduation First Year students (M.A., M.Sc., M.Com., B.Ed.). No incentive is given during summer and other vacations for more than one month. The scheme is available to all domiciled, unmarried female students of Assam, irrespective of economic status, except, female students enrolled in B.Ed. courses, in-service B.Ed. candidates, candidate on deputation and daughters of Ministers, MPs, and MLAs. Furthermore, females who receive scooters as part of the Banikanta Kakati Award under the Pragyan Bharati Scheme are not eligible. However, if any girl opts out of receiving the scooter, she can apply for the Nijut Moina scheme. Apart from this, the Mobility Grant scheme for students of government and provincialized colleges for PG students has been merged under MMNM, and there will be no separate scheme operable independently. The application process is offline, whereby students are required to fill in a prescribed form and send the same to their respective institutions. These are verified and hosted by Registrars/Principals on a specified portal for auto-verification. They are not expected to reapply from the second year onwards, but are required to produce a certificate of continuity signed by the head of the institution. One or two Nodal Teachers in every institution are given responsibility for implementing the scheme in their respective institutions. The fund is remitted monthly by way of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) to the student's bank account. Beneficiaries are required to be well-behaved and obey all the regulations of the institution; misconduct, ragging, or impersonation will most probably result in disqualification from the scheme. Guardians can decide individually whether their daughters should apply for this scheme, realizing there is no compulsion to do so.

In 2024, around 1.8 lakh females benefited from this initiative²⁷. The Government of Assam expanded this scheme to 4.3 lakh females by covering a new batch of females entering the first year. It also proposed to extend this benefit to females pursuing self-financed courses in Government educational institutions. To ensure timely disbursement of benefits to the students through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), it allocated Rs. 391 crore for the FY 2025-26 (Assam Budget, 2025-26).

10. Assam Jibon Prerana Scheme: In pursuance of the announcement made by the Hon'ble Finance Minister in the Assam Budget Speech for the financial year 2025-26, the Assam Government announced the Chief Minister Jibon Prerana Scheme, i.e., Mukhyamantrir Jibon Prerana Asoni, with the aim to promote academic excellence and innovation in the state by supporting students pursuing higher education. The scheme was launched by the Government of Assam under the Skill, Employment & Entrepreneurship Department to provide one-time financial assistance to eligible full-time research scholars who were admitted on or after 1st April 2021 from a Government or Public institution of central or state located in Assam. Under this scheme, financial aid of Rs. 25,000 and Rs. 40,000 is to be provided to research scholars and Divyang (differently-abled) research scholars respectively. The assistance will be transferred directly to the bank account of the eligible scholar through the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mode so as to maintain transparency. To avail the benefit, one must be a permanent resident of Assam.

11. Year of Books initiative: To promote literary activities and foster a vibrant book culture, GoA is planning initiatives that will support the growth of literature and encourage greater public engagement with books. For this, financial support to 1,000 young writers, offering Rs. 25,000 each, will be provided, with a focus on those contributing to creative, scientific, and academic writing. The government shall give financial support for organizing the Granth Mela approved by the Assam Prakashan Parishad, with Rs. 5 lakh allocated for the district and Rs. 2.5 lakh for the co-district headquarters each. It also proposes that all official gifts presented at government functions should be in the form of books, fostering a culture of knowledge and intellectual enrichment. It shall also give an additional one-time grant of Rs. 1,000 to each government employee for book purchase (Assam Budget, 2025-26).

²⁷https://directoratofofhighereducation.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dhe_medhassu_in_oid_4/menu/document/nijut_moina_final_guideline.pdf

12. Chief Minister's Climate Resilient Village Fellowship: The Chief Minister's Climate Resilient Village Fellowship Programme, launched in 2022 by the Science, Technology and Climate Change Department, Government of Assam, is a significant initiative being implemented by the Assam Science Technology and Environment Council. Its primary goal is to enhance climate resilience and sustainable development in rural communities of Assam. Emphasizing the importance of innovation, technology adoption in a phased manner, and strong leadership, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam aims to address climate change in line with Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG-13). The Programme targets the participation of 100 postgraduate science students and engineering graduates, who will study climate change impacts and potential solutions in 100 villages in a phased manner. The selected fellows will receive a one-time fellowship of Rs. 20,000, along with training, resources, support, and guidance from scientific institutions to implement innovative climate change solutions in their respective villages²⁸.

Initiatives especially for Tea Garden Students:

1. Reservation and Financial Assistance for Higher Studies: The Government of Assam proposed to introduce reservation of seats for tea garden students in all higher educational institutions. Further, another 670 students pursuing engineering, medical, and various other technical courses would be provided assistance under Financial Assistance for Higher Studies (Assam Budget, 2017-18). Approximately 65,000 applications were received through the SIRISH online portal for financial assistance/scholarships, reflecting the significant impact of financial assistance on educational pursuits (Assam Budget, 2024-25).

2. Pre-Matric Scholarship: The Pre-Matric Scholarship for Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes in Assam was launched in the year 2016-17. The Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare Department offers a Pre-Matric Scholarship to students from Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities in Assam who are studying in Class IX or X. The objective of the scheme is to provide financial assistance to the students of tea and ex-tea garden tribes who are eligible, to enable them to complete their education. An approximate target was fixed at 40,000 students, and for this, Rs. 550 lakhs were allocated for the financial year 2016-17²⁹. This scholarship provides financial assistance of Rs. 3,000

²⁸ <https://astec.assam.gov.in/frontimpotentdata/state-meet-for-use-of-space>

²⁹ <https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/schemes/pre-matric-scholarship-to-the-students-belonging-to-tea-tribes-and-ativasi-community>

per annum per student to support their education. The money is made available to the students directly through e-transfer. The scheme is implemented by the Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare.

3. Post-Matric Scholarship: The Post-Matric Scholarship is a scheme sponsored by the Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare, Assam, for students from the Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities pursuing post-matriculation studies. It aims to provide financial assistance to eligible students pursuing higher education. An approximate target was fixed at 4,835 students, and for this, Rs. 240 lakhs were allocated for the financial year 2016-17³⁰. The scholarship provides Rs. 5,000 per annum to students studying in Class IX or X and Rs. 7,000 per annum to students pursuing degree courses³¹. The money is made available to the students directly through e-transfer. The scheme is implemented by the Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare.

4. Simon Sing Horo Special Post-Matric Scholarship: The Simon Sing Horo Special Post-Matric Scholarship is implemented by the Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare. The objective of the scheme is to provide a one-time incentive of Rs. 10,000 each to students belonging to the Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities who have cleared HSLC under the Board of Secondary Education (SEBA) or an equivalent education board recognized by the Government of Assam, and HSSLC in any stream under the Assam Higher Secondary Education Council (AHSEC) or an equivalent board recognized by the Government of Assam during the current year, so that they are motivated to continue their further education. The selected students receive financial assistance through e-transfer/direct bank transfer into their respective bank accounts³².

5. Financial Assistance for Higher Studies (IIT, IT, MBBS, MBA): The Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare provides financial assistance to students belonging to the Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities pursuing higher studies like MBBS, MBA, Engineering, and other technical/higher education, including studies in Administration, Medical, Engineering, Law, Research, and Education within and

³⁰ <https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/schemes/post-metric-scholarship-for-tea-and-tea-gardens-0>

³¹ https://sirishassam.in/home/post_matric_scholarship

³² https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dwtt_lipl_in_oid_4/menu/document/guidelines_for_simon_sing_horo_special_post-matric_scholarship.pdf

outside the State/Country. This assistance aims to support students pursuing higher education within and outside the state. The scheme provides financial assistance ranging from Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 35,000 per annum, depending on the type of course. A one-time amount of Rs. 35,000 per annum is provided to students pursuing studies like MBBS, BDS, MAMS, BAMS, BVSc, MVSc, BE, ME, B.Tech, M.Tech, B.Arch, M.Arch, M.Phil, Ph.D., and equivalents. A one-time amount of Rs. 30,000 per annum is provided to students pursuing studies like MBA, M.Sc (Agri), LLM, B.Sc (Agri), B.Sc (Bio-Tech), and equivalents. Rs. 25,000 per annum is provided to students pursuing courses like B.Sc. Nursing and postgraduate courses such as MA, MSc, MSc Nursing, M.Com, MSW, LLB, B.Ed, and equivalents. The selected students receive the financial assistance through e-transfer/direct bank transfer into their respective bank accounts³³.

6. Financial Assistance for ANM/GNM/Technical Courses: The Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare in Assam provides financial assistance for the training of ANM, GNM, B.Sc Nursing, Para-Medical, and other job-assured courses to empower Tea Tribe youths for self-employment. The objective of the scheme is to provide assistance to the youths of the Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities for training in ANM, GNM, Para-Medical, and other job-assured technical and professional diploma & degree courses with a minimum of 1 (one) year duration in both Government and Non-Government Institutes. This assistance includes course fees, tuition fees, and other related expenses and ranges from Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 20,000 per annum, depending on the type of course. An amount of Rs. 20,000 per annum is provided to students pursuing GNM from both government and non-government institutions, and Rs. 15,000 per annum to students pursuing ANM from both government and non-government institutions. Rs. 8,000 per annum is provided to students pursuing Polytechnic, Vocational three-year Degree Courses and equivalents. Rs. 6,000 per annum is provided to students pursuing ITI, Lab Technician, and other Diploma courses of not less than two years' duration. Rs. 4,000 per annum is provided to students pursuing PGDCA, Beauty Therapist, and other diploma courses of not less than one year duration. The selected students receive financial assistance through e-transfer/direct bank transfer into their respective bank accounts³⁴.

³³ https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dwtt_lipl_in_oid_4/menu/document/guidelines_for_financial_assistance_for_higher_studies.pdf

³⁴ https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dwtt_lipl_in_oid_4/menu/document/guidelines_for_financial_assistance_for_anm_gnm_and_technical_courses.pdf

7. Coaching for Higher Studies: The Directorate of Tea Tribes Welfare, Assam, has implemented a scheme for students belonging to Tea Tribes and the Adivasi community to undergo coaching in reputed institutions within Assam. The objective of the scheme is to provide coaching to students of the Tea Tribes' community for preparing them for various competitive examinations like Civil Services, Medical, Engineering, Staff Selection Commission (Graduate level), Banking (Probationary Officers), etc., so that they can compete with other candidates and succeed. The duration of coaching ranges from 6 months to 1 year. The selected candidates shall undergo free-of-cost coaching in government-identified coaching centres/institutes within Assam. The fee structure of the scheme, funded by the government, varies across the types of competitive exams. Selected candidates for courses like IIT-JEE and NEET receive up to Rs. 1,00,000 for one year, for Civil Services up to Rs. 65,000, and for SSC CGL, Bank PO, and government assistant level up to Rs. 25,000. Selection of the beneficiaries is conducted on a merit basis based on Class XII or graduate-level marks³⁵. For competitive exam preparation, 55 students have been selected under the Coaching for Higher Studies scheme for Civil Services, Medical, Engineering, and Banking exams (Assam Budget, 2025-26).

8. Financial Assistance to those who cleared prelims conducted by UPSC/APSC:

The Directorate of Tea Tribes Welfare, Assam, has implemented a financial assistance scheme for students who cleared the preliminary exam conducted by UPSC/APSC and belong to the Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities. The objective of the scheme is to provide financial assistance to such students to support them in their preparation for the mains examination and to succeed. Candidates who cleared the preliminary examination conducted by UPSC receive Rs. 1,00,000, and those who cleared the preliminary examination conducted by APSC receive Rs. 75,000. The selected students receive financial assistance through e-transfer/direct bank transfer into their respective bank accounts³⁶. A similar facility for students from the Moran and Motok communities was promised to be set up in the 2019-20 budget speech. To support aspirants clearing Civil Services prelims conducted by UPSC/APSC, the government has provided financial assistance of Rs. 75,000 each to 11 candidates (Assam Budget, 2025-26).

³⁵https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dwtt_lipl_in_oid_4/menu/document/guidelines_for_financial_assistance_for_anm_gnm_and_technical_courses.pdf

³⁶https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dwtt_lipl_in_oid_4/menu/document/guideline_for_financial_assistance_to_students_who_cleared_civil_services_prelims_conducted_by_upsc-apsc.pdf

While the data on actual expenditure and beneficiary coverage of almost all the above-mentioned schemes are inaccessible to the public domain, some figures are available which are often cited in budget speeches and public meetings. These forms of data are not enough for a rigorous evaluation of the schemes' effectiveness. As the figures cited in budget speeches or meetings diverge from the actual figures, often reflected in implementation outcomes.

6. Assessing Major Educational Schemes in Assam through the Lens of Access, Equity, and Quality

The evaluation of the major initiatives and schemes of the Assam government from 2016 to 2025 is discussed into three broad themes: Access, Equity, and Quality.

6.1 Access and Enrolment

The state has made commendable progress in enhancing access to education, primarily through direct support schemes designed to reduce the financial burden on families and students. The recent government extended free textbook provision up to Classes IX-X (Assam Budget, 2016-17) and later up to Classes XI-XII (Assam Budget, 2017-18) in all government and provincialized schools. By 2020, it aimed to include the college undergraduates and post-graduates by providing financial assistance of Rs. 1000, later increased to Rs. 1500 and Rs. 2000 for purchasing books. School uniform allowances were also provided initially up to Class VIII at Rs. 400 each, later raised to Rs. 600 in 2019, and then extended up to Classes IX-X at Rs. 700 each student per year. These measures were taken to remove the basic material costs so that the parents could send their children without worrying about the costs. Similarly, to ease higher-education entry, it introduced generous fee-waiver schemes. From the year 2016-17, students from families earning less than Rs. 1 lakh per annum, later increased the limit to Rs. 2 lakhs in the 2019-20 budget, were exempted from tuition/admission fees in government higher secondary schools and junior colleges, with no income limit for Children with Special Needs. For higher education, the government provided Financial Assistance to poor but meritorious students under the Department of Higher Education, and also a 50% subsidy on interest for education loans, Rs. 50 lakhs for 2016-17 was proposed to support college/university students (Assam Budget, 2016-17). Initially, these provisions were provided under the Gyan Deepika scheme, later these subsidies were consolidated under Pragyani Bharati scheme with more extended and other provisions such as admission fee waivers to all students up to graduate-level

from below-poverty-line (BPL) families, examination fee exemptions, direct cash transfers to eligible students and mess dues subsidies of Rs. 700 monthly, and later raised to Rs. 1000 to college and university hostellers across elementary to higher education level. Thus, the state government has systematically made attempts to reduce structural barriers to enrolment. This comprehensive structural support model has been important in increasing enrolment and retention, especially among economically weaker sections. Similarly, targeted programs for female students such as initially the scooties for meritorious girls who secured 1st division in 12th examination, started in 2017-18 and later the same brought under Pragyan Bharati scheme and continued it in the name of Pragyan Bharati Scooty Scheme since 2020 offered both direct physical mobility and indirect financial incentives to retain adolescent girls in higher secondary and higher education. Similarly, the initiative like the Dr. Banikanta Kakati Merit Award Scheme, which was a part of the Pragyan Bharati Scooty scheme, under which meritorious students, regardless of gender, were provided free scooties to encourage the students to continue their educational journey. These schemes not only encouraged continued participation but also symbolically challenged gendered restrictions on mobility in rural Assam. Similarly, the state has shown increased commitment to support disadvantaged groups, including Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, and minority communities, through special scholarships, incentives, and admission fee waivers initiatives. For instance, the SIRISH portal, launched since 2020-21, streamlines access to scholarships and academic grants for students, especially Tea and Adivasi communities from historically underserved areas.

Pragyan Bharati's initiatives have had a clear impact on enrolment in primary, secondary as well and tertiary levels of education. Since its launch, the scheme has benefitted a total of 22.30 lakh students up to the fiscal year 2023-24, indicating a significant achievement in educational empowerment. There was a surge in admissions from 1,38,085 students in 2016-17 to 2,94,633 students in 2023-24³⁷, more than doubling the intake of poor and middle-income students over 7 years. This corresponds with an upward trend in the state's Gross Enrolment Ratio in elementary education and a modest upward trend in secondary and higher education, though still below the national average, validating the scheme's effectiveness in promoting access. The scheme's free textbook and uniform component also ensures near-universal provision of learning materials in schools, which likely contributes

³⁷<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/pragyan-bharti-scheme-benefits-349-educational-institutions-with-rs-6844-crore/articleshow/111646762.cms>

to improving attendance and engagement by benefitting over 12 lakh students each year (Assam Budget, 2025-26). Similarly, the Bidya Lakshmi scheme, targeted at a specific group, its a direct impact on statewide educational access. However, the government employees in Assam who fall in the middle or lower-middle income brackets, for whom sending a child to an expensive professional course like engineering, medical, or MBA might be financially straining, can afford to send their children with this scheme. Besides, the Nijut Moina scheme, which was launched to directly tackle two historically significant issues, such as child marriage mostly in minority areas in Assam, and its adverse impact on maternal health and the dropout of adolescent girls. The presence of child marriage in the state, which stands at 31.8% for women in the age group of 20-24 married before 18 (NFHS-5,2019-21), is one of the highest in India, and this is both a cause and consequence of girls dropping out after puberty. By providing a monetary incentive to families, conditional on their studying and not marrying, it changes the cost-benefit calculus. Instead of seeing a girl as an economic burden, families have a reason to keep their girl child in school, as she effectively earns a stipend for the family by studying. This scheme thus improves access by reducing both financial and social barriers. The dropout rate in the historically underprivileged ethnic tea and Adivasi community is very high. The state interventions, like one-time incentives, scholarships, and a reservation system, are directly improving access in these communities that lag behind. Similarly, the Tea garden children often suffered malnutrition, which affects their attendance in school, which directly or indirectly impacts their final results. The recent decision by the Government of Assam to provide breakfast in addition to mid-day meals is especially targeted to benefit the children in disadvantaged areas, especially tea gardens³⁸, where malnutrition is high. Nutritional support is the way to incentivise the families to send their children to school.

Despite these successes, access does not necessarily translate to educational continuity or attainment. The state continues to grapple with high dropout rates, particularly at the secondary level. As per UDISE+ (2024-25), the dropout rate for secondary education in Assam stood at 17.5%, significantly higher than the national average of 11.5% (Table 2). This indicates that while initial access barriers are being addressed, deeper structural challenges such as academic failure, lack of parental support, early marriage, especially child marriage, child labour, and regional disparities, remain unresolved. Furthermore, while scholarships and fee waivers are helpful, gross enrolment in higher education remains low. Assam's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)

³⁸ Assam plans to expand mid-day meal scheme with breakfast to address school dropouts

for higher education was approximately 16.9%, compared to the national average of 28.3%, as reported by the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE, 2021-22), reflecting a significant access gap at the tertiary level. A critical weakness in the access strategy lies in its meritocratic targeting mechanisms, though it incentivizes the students. Many flagship schemes, such as free scooters, cash awards, or laptops, are linked to scoring first division marks or other high academic benchmarks, inadvertently excluding low-performing students, who often belong to vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds and are in greater need of support. Moreover, such schemes may increase inequality by favouring already better-off students who have access to superior schooling environments, further entrenching educational disparities. Another significant concern is the urban-rural divide. Students in tribal or remote hill districts, such as Dima Hasao, West Karbi Anglong, Chirang, or Char areas, continue to face challenges in accessing even basic schooling facilities. These include poor road connectivity, long travel distances, unavailability of higher secondary schools, and safety concerns, particularly for girls. While subsidies in hostels and bicycle grants have attempted to address this, the impact has been modest due to limited institutional presence and logistical barriers.

Table 2: Drop-out rate of Assam in comparison to all India level

India/ State	Dropout Rate								
	2018-19								
	Primary			Upper Primary			Secondary		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Assam	3.5	2.6	3.1	3.1	0.7	1.9	30.8	32.1	31.5
All India	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.3	5.1	4.7	18.7	17.1	17.9
2024-25									
Assam	4.7	2.9	3.8	7.0	3.2	5.0	18.5	16.7	17.5
All India	0.8	0.0	0.3	4.1	2.9	3.5	13.3	9.6	11.5

Source: U DISE, 2018-19 & 2024-25

6.2 Equity and Social Inclusion

The myriads of welfare schemes in Assam reflect an equity-oriented agenda where price and cost barriers to education have been aggressively reduced for the poor and marginalized. Free textbooks/uniforms, fee waivers, and scholarship provisions lower financial hurdles (SDG target 4.1), while a vehicle scheme for girls and stipends or financial assistance for minorities address social inclusion (4.5).

Similarly, the scooter and cycle schemes have enabled thousands of rural female students to travel to school or college, a concrete improvement in mobility and safety. Beyond vehicles, the Assam government implemented targeted scholarships for female minority students. Announced in Budget 2018-19, females from minority communities receive DBT scholarships tiered by level (e.g., Rs. 2,000 for Class 10; Rs. 4,000 for Class 11-12; Rs. 6,000 for graduates; Rs. 10,000 for postgraduates) on self-certification of being unmarried and a student. This scheme was formally launched in FY2019-20 and continued through 2023-24. The intent was to raise enrolment and retention among Muslim and other minority girls, though data on impact remain scant. Notably, from 2024-25, the recent Mukhya Mantri Nijut Moina (MMNM) scheme provides financial grants to all eligible female students to continue their higher education by reducing financial hurdles. These provisions reflect the government's effort to align with SDG4's goal of equal access for women. Similarly, the government also extended benefits to disadvantaged communities. Pre- and post-matric scholarships were funded for SC, ST, and OBC students. For the large tea-tribe and Adivasi population in Assam, a special directorate provides multiple grants: pre-matric scholarships (Rs. 3,000/year per student in Class IX-X), post-matric awards of Rs. 5000-7,000 yearly depending on level, and the Simon Sing Horo scheme, Rs. 10,000 one-time to HSLC/HSSLC pass-outs to encourage continued schooling. Professional course students such as MBBS, engineering, MBA, etc., from tea gardens can get Rs. 25,000-35,000 per year, depending on discipline. There are also special grants for ANM/GNM/technical diploma courses of Rs. 4000-20000 yearly. To support higher education financing, another initiative, the Abhinandan scheme, launched in 2019, offers a one-time subsidy of Rs. 50,000 on approved education loans of more than Rs. 1 lakh for state residents who have repaid 25% of the principal. By late 2020, over 6,000 students had benefited, with Rs. 22 crore disbursement, with Rs. 75 crores earmarked in FY 2019-20 (Assam Budget 2019-20). However, in 2024, the government revised Abhinandan 2.0, restricting the eligibility of loans under Rs. 2 lakhs, and those in default were excluded. There is also another Bidya Lakshmi scheme, offering low-interest (4%) loans to state government employees' children for higher studies (Rs. 5-10 lakh loans, no collateral up to Rs. 10 lakh). Both schemes are attempts to alleviate financial barriers in tertiary education. These efforts of the government directly reflect the commitment "Leave no one behind" of the United Nations' 2030 for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals.

The Pragyam Bharati scheme, which targets the economically weaker sections directly, addresses the economic equity in access to higher education by raising

the income eligibility to Rs. 4 lakhs. The scheme covers not only BPL families but also lower-middle-class families who often struggle with college costs for their children. This broadened inclusion has particularly benefited rural students and those from marginalized communities (SC/ST/OBC), who are over-represented among lower-income groups. Similarly, gender equity also got a boost from the Pragyan Bharati scooter scheme, by providing a scooter to a girl student, which enhances her mobility and safety, which in turn encourages continued education. Consequently, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in higher secondary and higher education in Assam has been moving toward parity. In higher secondary, females' enrolment is roughly on par with males (Table-2). At the tertiary level, the gap has also narrowed. With the help of the Bidya Laxmi scheme, many government officials who fall in the middle or lower-middle income brackets can send their children to higher education. Another equity-focused initiative targeting a historically underprivileged ethnic community, especially the tea garden workers whose literacy rate is estimated to be much lower than the state average, by providing educational facilities to them and providing scholarships, the state attempts to level the overall regional picture. An estimated 65,000 applications were received through the SIRISH portal for financial assistance scholarships, reflecting the significant impact of financial assistance on educational pursuits. (Budget 2024-25). Over the succeeding years, these measures have helped to reduce the gap in literacy and educational attainment between tea tribe communities and the overall state average. Gender equity within tea garden communities is also to be achieved through receiving the incentives in the ANM/ GNM courses.

Table 3: Gender parity index of Assam in comparison to all India

Gender Parity Index (GPI)					
2004-2005					
State	Primary (1-5)	Upper Primary (6-8)	Secondary (9-10)	Higher Secondary (11-12)	Graduation and Above
Assam	0.99	0.93		0.79	0.70
All India	0.95	0.88		0.79	0.71
2015-2016					
State	Primary (1-5)	Upper Primary (6-8)	Secondary (9-10)	Higher Secondary (11-12)	Graduation and Above
Assam	1.03	1.12	1.15	1.04	0.90
All India	1.03	1.09	1.02	1.01	0.92
2023-2024					

State	Primary (1-5)	Upper Primary (6-8)	Secondary (9-10)	Higher Secondary (11-12)	Graduation and Above
Assam	1.06	1.15	1.25	1.13	1.09
All India	1.03	1.02	1.02	1.07	1.01

Note: GPI=GER of Girls/GER of Boys. Note: GPI mentioned in the year 2023-24 are actually in the year 2021-22.

Source: MoHRD, GoI/AISHE, 2021-22

However, critical gaps and overlaps remain where many benefits depend on merit, which inherently favours those already advantaged, rather than need. The two-wheeler schemes benefit top scorers, leaving out average females who may still face access issues. Similarly, as per the recently updated guideline of Anundoram Borooh laptop or cash award goes to those who secure Star marks (at least 75%) or more in the 10th Board examination, typically the top 0.1%, a very limited group. In contrast, dropout is highest among the poorest quintiles, and there are no cash transfers or conditional support like scholarships for low performers to retain struggling children, though the government is attempting to bring them under a different incentive scheme in recent times. Moreover, the proliferation of targeted schemes risks duplication. While the consolidation of MMNM subsuming earlier programs may streamline funds, it indicates policy churn and potential confusion for beneficiaries.

6.3 Quality in terms of learning outcome and Infrastructure

On the quality front, the direct objective of Pragyan Bharati was associated with access and equity, not academic performance. However, certain quality-related outcomes can be connected. One is that reducing financial stress on students can improve their academic focus and reduce dropouts for financial reasons, which indirectly supports better learning continuity. Another is the free textbook provision - having textbooks from the start of the academic year is known to improve study habits and learning outcomes. While Nijut Moina is not academically conditional, it can indirectly improve educational outcomes by keeping female students in an educational environment. Females who enroll in Class 12 and beyond would have better learning outcomes than if they drop out at Class 10. Also, the scheme might encourage females to focus on studies without worrying about earning or marriage. Having a stipend might reduce pressure on older females to work to support their families, allowing them time for homework. Crucially, the scheme's attempt to curb

child marriage has broad social significance. Educating a girl child is proven to have multiplicative effects by delaying marriage and childbearing and finally reducing maternal and infant mortality, aligning with SDG 3 on health, increasing female workforce participation, and educated mothers ensure better education for the next generation. The Chief Minister of Assam explicitly linked the scheme to breaking the cycle of underage motherhood and associated domestic issues like marital disputes, financial difficulties, etc. The government, in recent times, by provincializing schools and putting regular teachers, is attempting to ensure a basic standard of education in recent times.

Additionally, programs like Gunotsav, the external evaluation of schools and students, have been extended to tea garden schools to monitor learning levels. The first rounds of Gunotsav (2017-2018) revealed very low learning outcomes in many tea garden schools, which spurred targeted remedial teaching there. The improvement in infrastructure will gradually reflect in better performance by tea estate students in board exams. In early times, hardly any tea tribe students went to college; however, it is expected more in recent times. The number of tea community students receiving the Anundoram Borooh laptop award or clearing competitive exams like PCS, medical, and engineering entrance has started to rise slightly, anecdotally credited to better schooling and some special coaching schemes by the Tea Tribes Welfare Department.

However, government data show serious structural deficits in the education system that undermine its progress on quality in Assam. Educational quality in terms of learning outcomes also remains an area of concern. The state has consistently ranked below the national average in learning outcomes, as evident in several national assessments. As per the National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021, there are significant differences between Assam students' performance and the national average in mathematics, while it is significantly lower than the national average in language. The average scores of Assam's students declined in foundational subjects compared to 2017, likely due in part to COVID-19 disruptions. The performance of the Class III and V students degraded in language, mathematics, and environmental studies in Assam compared to NAS 2017. However, the performance was better than the national average. In the Class III language assessment, the score dropped from 350 to 326, while in mathematics it declined from 337 to 314. The score in environmental studies also dropped from 331 to 313. In Class V language performance, the score dropped from 322 to 312, in mathematics from 333 to 291,

and in environmental studies from 327 to 291. The lower primary classes (up to Class V) had been the worst-affected during the pandemic as the teachers struggled to connect with the students through limited access to electronic gadgets (NAS, 2021). A substantial proportion of children in Assam were unable to solve basic arithmetic problems (ASER, 2022). A major factor contributing to low learning levels is the shortage of trained teachers. As per UDISE+ (2024-25) reports, the schools have only trained teachers of 39.6% at pre-primary, 66.6% at secondary, and 66.8% at higher secondary school in Assam. The lack of qualified educators severely limits the effectiveness of classroom instruction, particularly in rural and tribal areas where vacancies are more pronounced. Moreover, professional development programs for in-service teachers remain underfunded and irregular, with no consistent policy framework for capacity building in line with NEP 2020. School infrastructure quality further exacerbates the learning crisis. Despite investments under Samagra Shiksha, UDISE+ (2024-25) report shows that 11.2% of schools in Assam lack a regular supply of electricity, about 2.4% of schools lack functional drinking water facilities, and less than 10.5% of schools do not have girls' toilet facilities, further, not all schools have access to computers or functional digital learning facilities. The digital divide became even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online education remained inaccessible to a large segment of Assam's rural student population. Although the state had proposed digital learning initiatives and device distribution programs (Assam Budget, 2021-22), these were either delayed or partially implemented, thereby limiting their impact. Another neglected area is curriculum and pedagogical reform. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for competency-based, multidisciplinary, and experiential learning, the state has made limited progress in aligning its curricula and classroom practices with these principles. It has yet to implement large-scale curricular redesign or introduce foundational learning reforms in vernacular and tribal languages, a move that could substantially benefit early-grade learners in multilingual regions. Similarly, the state lacks a structured plan for integrating vocational education into the school curriculum, a key NEP, 2020 recommendation that could reduce dropout rates and enhance employability. Another quality aspect is language. The tribal students often speak a dialect at home different from Assamese or English used in school. There is a need to introduce bilingual materials to help ease this transition, improving comprehension.

While access and equity initiatives have been expansive, fewer programs explicitly target the quality of education. The government upgraded mid-day meals and

distributed free digital devices (planned for 2021-22, but dropped when schools reopened) to address learning loss, but comprehensive teacher training and infrastructure schemes are less prominent. Only 75.5% of schools have electricity, and nearly 91% of schools have drinking water in Assam. The computer and internet facilities at schools, even at colleges, are insufficient. There is a low percentage of trained teachers at pre-primary, secondary, and higher secondary. These gaps undermine learning quality. The government's flagship budgets often focus on inputs such as books, fees, and incentives rather than strengthening pedagogy or school facilities. Though in recent times there is an upward trend in infrastructure investments, the government has been undertaking initiatives such as providing LPG connections at Anganwadi and schools, expanding school infrastructure in tea garden areas, establishing new model schools and colleges, upgrading colleges to universities but comprehensive quality enhancement plans such as teacher recruitment, ICT in classrooms, etc. still lag behind. Besides this, the state's education system suffers from the absence of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework. The schemes like Pragyan Bharati, Bidya Laxmi, Gyan Deepika, MMNM, etc. have disbursed substantial funds, there is little publicly available data on outcome metrics such as retention, transition rates, or learning gains. There have been no independent third-party evaluations of flagship schemes, nor have mechanisms like social audits or participatory school assessments been institutionalized. Without systematic evaluation, it becomes difficult to assess whether Assam's policy expenditures are translating into real improvements on the ground.

In a nutshell, Assam undertook a comprehensive set of educational initiatives that have begun to reshape the state's educational landscape under the new regime of government between 2016 and 2025. The Government of Assam's efforts have largely succeeded in improving access to education and promoting equity by removing financial barriers through schemes like the Pragyan Bharati scheme, Abhinandan scheme, Bidya Laxmi scheme, etc., and providing targeted incentives through programs like the Pragyan Bharati Scooty scheme, Anundoram Borooah Award and Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina Asoni, and other scholarship schemes. Assam has enabled more children, especially girls and those from disadvantaged communities, to enter and remain in the education system than ever before. The expansion of school infrastructure into previously neglected tea garden regions further exemplifies the state's commitment to inclusive education development. Additionally, these strides in access and equity are directly contributing to Assam's progress toward the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 and aligning with India's NEP 2020 objectives. More students in Assam in recent

times are enrolling in secondary and higher education, more girls aspire to college, and marginalized groups are gradually closing the educational attainment gap. The social ripple effects, such as expected reductions in child marriage and improvements in women's socio-economic status, will likely become more visible in the next few years, validating the state's investment in education as wise and transformative. However, the evaluation also underscores that improving educational outcomes, i.e., quality of learning, is the next critical frontier. While Assam has put in place some mechanisms for quality assurance and teacher support, the learning levels captured in assessments indicate that mere enrolment is not translating fully into expected competencies. Addressing this will require renewed focus on teacher training, pedagogical innovations, and possibly recalibrating resource allocation towards quality enhancement programs like reading campaigns, ICT-enabled personalized learning, etc. Besides this, the period up to 2025 also provides learning lessons in effective policy implementation, such as the use of technology and direct benefit transfers in Assam's schemes emerged as best practices that ensured transparency and citizen-centric service delivery. Continued monitoring, feedback loops, and data-driven adjustments will be key to sustaining the gains. For example, if certain districts still show high dropout or low learning outcomes, schemes may need to be fine-tuned or supplemented with additional interventions in those areas.

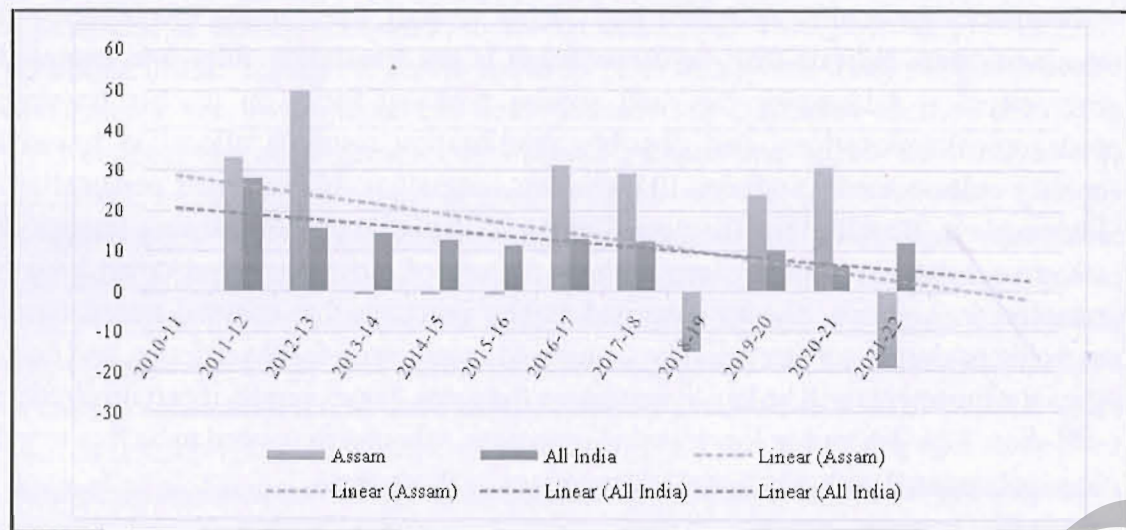
7. Fiscal Commitment, Sustainability, and Cost Effectiveness

Education and health should be at the top of any government's priority list, but prioritization is meaningful if allocation aligns with actual spending and a stable share of the economy. The recent budget of the state of Assam shows an increase in budgetary allocations to the education sector from 15.0% in 2024-25 to 17.8% in 2025-26³⁹. However, the actual expenditure does not translate into the budgetary allocation. The state spent more of about 5.4% of its economy on education than the national average (4.2%) and it also beats the national ratio in every single year, but its trajectory is more volatile. After an early peak of 7.2% in 2012-13, the state's share fell to 4.3% by 2015-16, spiked during the pandemic to 6.8% in 2021-22, partly because the state's GDP contracted while spending rose and then dropped to 4.1% in 2021-22. Figure 1 shows that the growth rate of expenditure on education is falling at both the regional (Assam) and national levels. However, the growth rate of Assam's education spending is slowing down compared to the national rate. Also, while in

³⁹ Assam Budget Analysis 2025-26

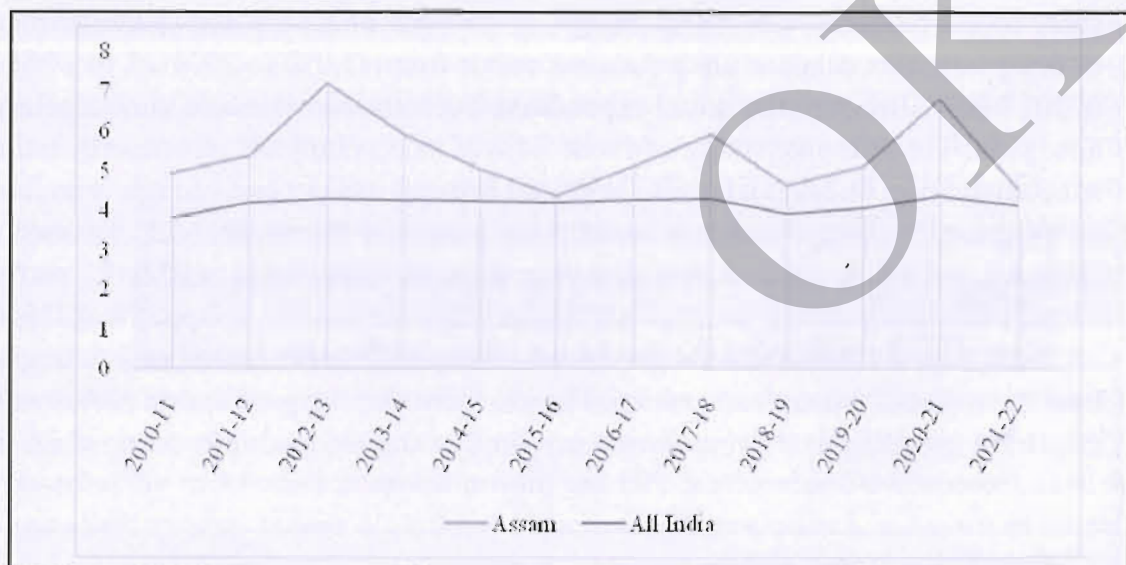
terms of percentage of GDP and GSDP, the expenditure almost remains similar at the national level, but significant ups and downs can be observed in the regional level (Figure 2). Assam spends a larger share of its GSDP than the national average.

Figure 1: Growth Rate of Total Expenditure on Education and Training by Education and Other Department



Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India & MoSPI

Figure 2: Percentage of Education & Training Budget of Education & Other Department to Total GDP and GSDP



Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India & MoSPI

The expenditure has been made on both revenue (salary, scholarship) and capital (infrastructure) accounts. However, in each budget, the government comes up with major flagship schemes such as Anundoram Borooah Award, Gyan Deepika, Pragyan Bharati, Bidya Laxmi, Mukhya Mantri Nijut Moina (MMNM) schemes, and other scholarship and incentive schemes, and major capital investment each year. For instance, an amount of Rs. 20 crores was allocated to provide free textbooks for all the students of class IX and X in the 2016-17 budget, but the combined expenditure for all educational welfare initiatives or schemes in the recent budget exceeds Rs. 500 crores. Under the Pragyan Bharati Scheme, the budgetary allocation grew from Rs. 410 crores (revenue expenditure) in 2022-23 to Rs. 1200 crores (revenue + capital expenditure) in 2023-24 (Assam Budget, 2023-24). Similarly, an amount of Rs. 240 crores was allocated under Mukhya Mantri Nijut Moina Scheme in 2024-25, which was increased to 391 crores for the FY 2025-26, reflecting a deliberate policy to equal access and lift historically excluded groups. The outcomes in terms of enrolment and completion justify these expenditures to some extent. From a gender lens, the female enrolment ratio in higher education is improving, and it is higher than that male counterparts. Similarly marginal improvement in terms of Gender Parity Index in higher education can be seen from 0.85 in 2016-17 to 0.92 in 2021-22 (AISHE, 2022), which may be attributed to schemes like Pragyan Bharati Scooty scheme and the mobility grant. Though the overall gross enrolment ratio in higher secondary and graduation and above in Assam is still lower than the national average. Similarly, the educational outcomes, particularly in foundational literacy and numeracy, dropped from 2017 to 2023 (ASER, 2023). UDISE+2024-25 data also reflects a dropout rate of 17.5% at the secondary level, which is significantly higher than the all-India average of 12.6%. Though the return on investment in human capital is hard to quantify immediately and it is expected to be positive in the long run in terms of an educated workforce, less early marriage leading to healthier families, etc.

From a sustainability perspective, since coming into power, the new government has rolled out a broad array of recurring welfare schemes and heightened the education sector as a political and fiscal priority. These welfare initiatives have resulted in year on year increases in budgetary allocations under the education head and sometimes make it highly sensitive to revenue shocks. These initiatives ranging from free textbooks, uniforms, to more capital-intensive incentives like two wheelers, laptops and direct benefit transfer, represent a paradigm shift from infrastructure led educational development to demand side subsidies targeted at

students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This approach, on one side, has enhanced electoral salience and social reach, but on the other side, it has brought about structural challenges that raise concern regarding their long-term sustainability. As these schemes are primarily state-funded, unlike centrally sponsored schemes such as Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meal, which enjoy cost-sharing mechanism with the central government. The absence of fiscal sharing in most of the state-specific schemes like Pragyan Bharati, Bidya Laxmi, Gyan Deepika, Abhinandan, etc. reflects a heavy financial burden concentrated solely on the state exchequer. Moreover, heavy reliance on state finances for this revenue expenditure is problematic, given the limited revenue generating capacity in the state. As Assam's tax revenue as a percentage of GSDP always remains below 6%, limiting the capacity to expand these social sector spending sustainably. Besides, a significant share of the state's fiscal resources comes from devolution of central taxes and grants-in-aid, which are often subject to political negotiation.

The long-term cost-effectiveness of many educational schemes in Assam remains underexamined. For instance, under the Pragyan Bharati Scooty Scheme, more than Rs. 50,000 is spent per unit on scooters given to girls scoring 60% and above in Higher Secondary. While this has led to improved mobility and possibly enrolment, evidence linking it directly to long-term academic or employment outcomes remains limited. The cost-effectiveness of schemes like Gyan Deepika, Pragyan Bharati can be inferred from the large beneficiary numbers for the amount spent. These schemes that integrate multiple components have demonstrated better cost-to-impact ratios by targeting multi-dimensional educational barriers. Studies suggest that comprehensive interventions are more cost-effective in increasing years of schooling than single-mode transfers (Evans & Popova, 2016). The MMNM scheme offers cash transfers of Rs. 10,000, Rs. 12500, and Rs. 25,000 annually to unmarried girls in HS, UG, and PG programs, respectively, indicating low-cost and broadly accessible. Some study suggests a correlation between this type of cash support and reduced rates of child marriage and higher female retention in education (Girls, N. B., 2018 & Flores & Nómada, 2021). For schemes like Abhinandan, the load of cost burden is in interest subsidy, which is not huge compared to large grant programs. Similarly, DBT provision to the beneficiaries is a straightforward mechanism, where leakages are minimal from an efficiency perspective, as money directly goes to the student's account. The main risk is if a girl marries but doesn't report and continues to take the stipend. There should be a monitoring mechanism to minimize these faults.

8. Discussion

In Assam, the educational initiatives combine a strong social-protection logic via fee waivers, cash or DBTs, meals, transport or mobility grants with visibility-rich merit incentives like laptop or cash awards, scooties, and a consolidation of schemes under broader umbrella schemes like Gyan Deepika, and later *Pragyan Bharati*, while layering new targeted programs for girls and tea-garden communities, post 2016. The free textbooks and exam or tuition fee waivers directly reduce the recurrent cost components that disproportionately deter poor households at grade transitions. This aligns with SDG-4 Target 4.1 on completion of free, equitable primary and secondary education, and with Samagra Shiksha's design to remove "segmentation" across elementary and secondary and to finance textbooks, uniforms, and access and retention inputs under a unified centrally sponsored scheme. International evidence indicates that abolishing school fees and reducing ancillary charges boost enrolment and progression, especially among the poorest, while magnitudes vary by context, the direction is robust in multi-country syntheses and consistent with India's rights-based framing since RTE (Ohba, 2011; Borkun, 2012; Casely-Hayford et al., 2025). Within Assam, ASER and NAS snapshots continue to show persistent learning gaps alongside post-pandemic recovery, underscoring that affordability reforms must be paired with pedagogy, especially foundational literacy and numeracy, to translate enrolment gains into learning (ASER 2023; NAS 2021 Assam). Similarly, the 2017-18 budgetary provision, such as adding eggs twice weekly and the more recent move to provide breakfast, fit within national PM-POSHAN nutritional norms linking school meals to improved attendance and modest gains in nutrition and certain cognitive outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. The school mid-day meals in India have increased participation and enrolment, with especially pronounced effects for females and disadvantaged groups (Afridi, 2011; Jayaraman & Simroth, 2015; Kristjansson et al., 2022). The nutritional improvements also complement learning and attendance, amplifying returns on other inputs (Afridi, 2011; Jayaraman & Simroth, 2015; Kaur, 2021). Similarly, transport constraints at the secondary transition are a well-documented barrier for females. Evidence shows that mobility interventions for females raise secondary enrolment and progression when distance and safety are binding constraints. Bihar's free bicycle program among rural females significantly increased secondary enrolment and exam appearance, and did so more cost-effectively than comparable cash transfers, even though test-pass rates did not rise immediately and reduced gender gaps at low cost (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017; Agrawal et al., 2024). Aligning with SDG-4 Target 4.5 on gender equity, Assam's two-wheeler or e-bike "scooty" initiative,

starting with the 2017 pilot, followed by the Pragyan Bharati Scooty scheme in 2020, and the gender-neutral Dr. Banikanta Kakati scheme in 2022, sits squarely on this evidence base by addressing last-mile access and time costs. The decision to expand scooters is coherently targeted at the commute constraint, but the recent merit thresholds (80%) can create exclusion among exactly those girls most at risk of dropout. Likewise, the stipends for adolescent girls in West Bengal's Kanyashree have reduced dropout and early marriage risk while supporting progression (Das & Sarkhel, 2019; Dutta & Sen, 2020). Assam's minority-girls scholarship (2019-2023), PG mobility grant, and the recent MMNM are in that lane. Similar targeted inclusion instruments, such as scholarships and financial assistance for historically excluded Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities, converge with the equity agenda and with evidence that targeted financial support and coaching can relax liquidity and information constraints in transition grades and higher education. Similarly, the state-specific pre-matric and post-matric scholarships, targeted coaching, and lump-sum assistance for higher and professional courses address these groups with low baseline attainment. However, shifting textbook assistance, mess subsidies, mobility grants, and scholarships to DBT channels is consistent with NEP-2020's governance emphasis and Samagra Shiksha's unified State Implementing Society (SIS) structure. DBT can reduce leakages and timing uncertainty, but effectiveness hinges on the coverage of banked beneficiaries and last-mile verification capacity in colleges or universities, particularly for tea-garden communities and first-generation learners. The Nijut Moina admission-incentive architecture marks an important shift from one-time assets toward recurring, education-contingent cash closer to conditional transfers to keep girls in school and delay marriage. However, this scheme expansion coincides with rising education outlays in Assam's budget, while the state's own-tax revenue has hovered around 5% of GSDP in recent years, below the 6% threshold often viewed as comfortable for aggressive social-sector expansion, indicating heightened exposure to cyclical revenue shocks unless growth broadens the base. Though the consolidation under Pragyan Bharati improves administrative efficiency.

Taken together, these perspectives compel a redefinition of access from a simplistic metric of enrolment to a multidimensional right to affordable, equitable, and quality learning opportunities. Achieving this requires countering commercialisation through strong public regulation, investing in foundational schooling quality, dismantling the socio-economic and infrastructural barriers that prevent marginalized groups from participating, and embedding the right to knowledge at the core of educational policy (Heymann et al., 2020; Banerji, Basant & Sen, 2014).

9. Conclusion

The government of Assam has launched a myriad of schemes targeting different sections of society to boost the education sector of the state. Although aggregate data shows an increased number of beneficiaries but it raises concerns regarding implementation and sustainability. Under the initiatives like the Pragyan Bharati scheme, it attempts to provide greater access to education while minimising the material cost, addressing one of the significant barriers to education. With policies like mid-day-meal, free admission, and free distribution of textbooks and uniforms, it significantly enhanced the school enrolment, especially among the weaker sections of the population. However, there are debates pointing to the arguments that enrolment does not always translate into attendance and retention. A significant dropout rate is seen even after the initiatives taken by the government. For instance, the drop-out rate rose from 3 % in 2016-17⁴⁰ to 8.2% in 2023-24⁴¹ for the upper primary level. In addition to this, the transition rate from primary to upper primary also dropped from 93.3% to 82.2% for the same period. Many students drop out due to household responsibilities, migration, and a lack of learning facilities. Therefore, access without providing quality support reflects enrolled but not educated children.

Moreover, in order to enhance the quality, initiatives like Gunotsav, an overall school assessment programme and digital learning programs are implemented, which show the government's commitment towards quality and technology-driven teaching. Also, the teacher training programs add more rigor to this initiative. However, these initiatives do not fruitfully reflect in the learning assessment report of ASER⁴². It reveals that in 2024, among the children in standard IV, 5.5% cannot even read letters, 12.9% can read letters but not words or higher and 25.3% can read words but not standard I level text or higher. These raise concerns about the quality of education provided in the school premises. Additionally, quality interventions remain uneven across the districts. For instance, districts like Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Golaghat performed way better than the West Karbi Anglong, Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar and Chirang in terms of percentage of schools graded A plus in the respective districts⁴³.

⁴⁰https://transdev.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/pnnd_medhassu_in_oid_2/portlet/level_2/chapter23.pdf

⁴¹ <https://ssa.assam.gov.in/resource/basic-data>

⁴² https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER_2024_Final-Report_13_2_24.pdf

⁴³ https://ssa.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/ssam_medhassu_in_oid_5/this_comm/gunotsav_book_2025_1_pdf.io_.pdf

This is due to the fact that rural and remote schools, especially in hill districts it is often seen to face a shortage of trained teachers and digital infrastructure. Thus, the focus on examination-based evaluation may improve monitoring but not necessarily ensure deeper learning outcomes. Quality of education is a rising issue; therefore, parents who can bear the private cost of education prefer to send their children to private schools rather than in any government schools. Hence, the percentage of children enrolled in government schools in standard I-V and standard VI-VIII is seen to follow a downtrend between 2018 and 2024⁴⁴. This depicts a vertical inequality where a section having relatively more economically capable individuals sends their children to private schools. In this context, it is also notable that the government of Assam has attempted to bring the marginalised groups into the educational mainstream through schemes and scholarships focusing on SC/ST/OBC students, girls and tea gardens. There is no doubt that these have had a measurable impact on participation. Yet, even after having these schemes, issues related to structural inequality still remain a great concern. Scholarship may help at the margin, but if schools lack basic infrastructure, then the marginalised group still remains excluded. There are still 32.33 percent of schools without a playground and 13.65% of schools without a library in 2023-24⁴⁵. In addition to this, there are still some schools that remain excluded from basic facilities like electricity and a functional girls' toilet. Nonetheless, the government promotes digital and technology-driven learning environments where more than half (54.98%) of the schools do not have internet facilities and less than one percent have access to digital library facilities at school. In this discourse, providing two-wheeler vehicles as a reward for outstanding performance to the higher secondary students raises three arguments. First, such incentives tend to privilege students who already have greater access to learning facilities and resources, which reinforces the existing inequality. Because students in schools with a lack of access to digital and infrastructural facilities systematically reduce the possibility of benefiting from such reward schemes. Second is that while the provision of two-wheeler is justified on the grounds of reducing mobility barriers of students along with enhancement in gross enrolment ratio⁴⁶, which can be addressed with a greater number of schools and colleges in remote and rural areas. Though a large number of, the Primary schools have been established post RTE, the commensurate increase in schools at secondary and higher secondary

⁴⁴ https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER_2024_Final-Report_13_2_24.pdf

⁴⁵ <https://ssa.assam.gov.in/resource/basic-data>

⁴⁶ https://directorateofhighereducation.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/dhe_medhassu_in_oid_4/menu/document/scooter_guideline.pdf

levels has not come up. This poses the risk of large-scale dropout of students in the higher classes. Therefore, even after having these initiatives, the drop-out rate is 25.1 in 2023-24 and the transition rate from secondary to higher secondary is 52.5⁴⁷. Third, although the government, both at the national and regional levels, advocates for electric vehicles to minimise the burden of crude oil and maximise environmental sustainability, providing ground petrol vehicles as a flagship scheme contradicts its inherent core objectives. This situation highlights the gap between policy intention and institutional capacity. This can be explained, while emphasis is given on universal access to primary education, insufficient attention is given to strengthening secondary and higher secondary education, weakening the long-term educational attainment. In contrast, several states such as Kerala, Chandigarh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Uttarakhand have shown a more balanced performance across levels of educational attainment in terms of gross enrolment ratio. Furthermore, as the government itself is advocating for a digital learning ecosystem, in that case laptop in the form of a reward may prove more meaningful and equitable. Such measures would directly address issues like the digital divide with greater access to online resources and e-learning platforms. This would broaden the vision with equity, quality and accessibility.

Overall, the government of Assam represents a strong commitment towards making education more inclusive and affordable. Hitherto, debates lie in balancing welfare-oriented schemes and structural reforms, which can ensure long-term quality improvements across all levels of education. The persistent disparities in quality, infrastructure and retention highlight that the schemes alone are not sufficient to bring a systematic reform. The real challenge lies in delivering the policies to the most marginalised section of the population in a sustained manner. While moving forward, improving teacher quality, strengthening school governance and linking education with employability are more crucial for translating policy efforts into social and economic transformation.

⁴⁷ <https://ssa.assam.gov.in/resource/basic-data>

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