

## Challenges of Inclusive Education in Assam with Special Reference to its Char Areas

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### Abstract

Inclusive education aims to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities, socio-economic disadvantages or geographical isolation. However, in Assam, particularly in its char areas (riverine islands), inclusive education faces significant challenges due to infrastructural deficits, socio-economic barriers and inadequate policy implementation. This paper examines the key obstacles to inclusive education in Assam's char regions, focusing on issues such as poor ICT integration, teacher training gaps, accessibility limitations and systemic neglect. It also explores potential solutions, emphasizing the need for targeted government interventions, community engagement and improved resource allocation.

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### 1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a fundamental right under 'Right to Education Act (2009)' and the 'Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)' in India. However, in Assam particularly in its char areas educational inclusion remains an unfulfilled promise. The 'char areas' of Assam, are riverine islands and sandbars formed by the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries. These areas are unique geographical features that have significant historical, social, and environmental importance. Char areas are geographically isolated riverine islands with limited access to development initiatives, making them vulnerable to educational disparities. These regions suffer from chronic underdevelopment, with literacy rates as low as 19.31% (compared to Assam's average of 85.9%). Inclusive education, which ensures access for all regardless of socio-economic or geographical barriers, remains elusive here due to flooding, poor infrastructure and teacher shortages.

In Assam, inclusive education has gained attention due to its diverse socio-cultural landscape and the need to address educational disparities. The Government of India has implemented several policies to promote inclusive education, such as 'The Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009)' mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14,

including those with disabilities. 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' (SSA) and 'Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage' (IEDSS) focus on integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools. Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018) consolidates efforts for inclusive education by providing resources, teacher training, and infrastructural support.

In Assam, the state government has adopted these policies but faces challenges in implementation due to geographical barriers, lack of awareness and insufficient teacher training (Das & Deka, 2020). Several studies highlight barriers to inclusive education in Assam. Many schools lack ramps, accessible toilets and learning materials for children with disabilities (Bora & Talukdar, 2019).

A significant gap exists in teacher training for inclusive pedagogies (Saikia & Phukan, 2021). Stigma and lack of awareness among parents and communities hinder the enrolment of children with disabilities (Hussain & Das, 2018). Remote and flood-affected areas in Assam struggle with school accessibility and retention (Dutta & Mahanta, 2022).

Inclusive Education for Marginalized Communities Assam has diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, including tribal communities (Bodos, Misings, Karbis) and tea garden

labourers. Non-Assamese-speaking children face difficulties due to the dominance of Assamese in schools (Baruah & Sharma, 2020). Children from tea tribes and rural areas often drop out due to poverty and child labour (Gogoi & Bora, 2021).

While Assam has made progress in inclusive education through policy adoption and NGO interventions, challenges like infrastructure gaps, teacher training, and socio-cultural barriers persist. There remain huge scope of research to focus on localized strategies, stronger policy implementation and community participation to ensure equitable education for all.

## 2. Challenges of Inclusive Education in Assam's Char Areas

### Geographic and Infrastructural Barriers

Geographical and infrastructural barriers are significant obstacles to achieving inclusive education, particularly for those students with disabilities and those in marginalised communities. These barriers limit access to quality education and perpetuate inequalities. Geographical barriers refer to challenges related to location, distance and transportation that prevent students from accessing schools. In char area of Assam, geographical issues to inclusive education are as:

- **Flooding and Erosion:** Annual flood destroy schools and disrupt academic calendars every year. As flood is recurring and remain for three to four months in a year, it lead loss of learning day of children of the region. River bank erosion changes the scenario of the village and displace household. Children of such displaced families face serious problem and many of them dropped out from their education.
- **Lack of Schools:** Many char villages lack proper school buildings, forcing children to travel long distances. Char area lack proper road communication and children from distant village cannot able to access school.
- **Teacher Absenteeism:** Remote postings deter teachers, leading to high vacancy rates. Teachers are not showing their interest to have posting in char area. Many of the school are running with either single teacher or no teacher.

### Infrastructural and Technological Barriers

Infrastructural barrier includes physical and systematic limitation in school facilities that exclude students with disabilities and other needs. Inaccessible buildings, poor maintenance, lack of assistive technologies etc. are few examples of infrastructural and technological barriers. Char areas suffer from severe infrastructural deficits, which hinder inclusive education:

- **Lack of ICT Integration:** Schools in char regions often lack computers, internet access, and digital learning tools, making ICT-based education nearly impossible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students in char areas struggled with online learning due to poor connectivity and a lack of devices.
- **Inaccessible School Infrastructure:** Many schools lack ramps, accessible toilets, and adaptive seating for students with disabilities, discouraging enrolment.
- **Geographical Isolation:** Char areas are often cut off from mainland Assam, limiting access to government programs and educational resources.

### Teacher-Related Challenges

Teachers play a crucial role in inclusive education, but several issues persists that hinder their ability to support diverse learning effectively. These challenges include:

- **Insufficient Training:** Many teachers lack training in inclusive pedagogies, special education, and assistive technologies. Even many teachers lack the basic training necessary for a teacher.
- **Resistance to Inclusion:** Teachers attitudes significantly impact the success of inclusive education. Some educators believe students with disabilities should attend segregated schools, reflecting deep-seated attitudinal barriers.
- **High Student-Teacher Ratios:** Overburdened teachers struggle to provide individualized attention to students with diverse needs. Due to less number of schools compared to its need, enrolment is high and number of teacher is insufficient. It is near impossible to a teacher to make special attention to students.
- **Lack of Teaching Aids:** Many schools lack assistive technologies like Braille materials, speech to text software or adaptive learning tools. Absence of teaching-learning material could not provide encourage able learning environment to children learners.
- **Insufficient Support Staff:** A shortage of teaching assistants, special educators and therapists increases the burden on regular teachers.

### Socio-Economic and Attitudinal Barriers

An equitable learning opportunity is the main aim of inclusive education which badly affected by the socio economic disparities and deep rooted attitudinal barriers and it often hinders progress. High cost education, child labour, hidden cost etc. are some constraints related to poverty and economic condition of the people. Again, rural-urban divide and privatisation of education create problem in access to quality education. In char area of Assam socio economic and attitudinal challenges can be stated as:

- **Poverty and Marginalization:** Many families in char areas rely on agriculture, with limited resources to afford education-related expenses. Near about 68% of char dweller live below the poverty line and they are struggling for food and other necessities. The poor economic condition limiting access to education.
- **Social Stigma and Bullying:** Students with disabilities often face discrimination, leading to low enrolment and high dropout rates. Stigma and lack of awareness among parents and communities hinder the enrolment of children with disabilities.
- **Gender Disparities:** Gender discrimination to girls often a common in char area particularly in Muslim dominated area. Girls, especially those with disabilities, face additional barriers due to societal norms.
- **Low Literacy:** Intergenerational illiteracy among the parents of the char region is a normal phenomenon and high dropout rates persist among school going children, especially among girls.
- **Land Rights Issues:** Lack of land ownership documents prevents families from settling permanently in a particular place. Due to several reasons they are migrating one place to another which affect school enrolment and dropped out.

### Policy Implementation Gaps

Char area in Assam is peculiar in its nature and is isolated geographically as well as a disadvantaged region. Recurring flood, poor connectivity, ethnic and linguistic diversity are common in this region. Due to its peculiar remoteness there remains a gap of implementation of Government policy to progress and inclusive education.

### Physical Accessibility

Lack of permanent school building, absence of ramps, accessible toilet, transportation issues etc. are main physical accessibility issues to discourage children to attend school. Ramps are necessary for especially abled children and accessible toilet facilities attracted girls' children to continue their school education.

### Teacher-related Issue

So far as a teacher-related challenge is concern, there is acute shortage of qualified teachers and high absenteeism due to difficult posting. Children with disabilities get no professional support as there is no provision of special educators. A language barrier is another issue related to teacher. Teacher often don't speak local dialect in many of the char areas.

### Poor Monitoring

The monitoring system is so poor. Hard to reach location discourage teacher posting and monitoring. Education officials rarely visit schools located in char area. Schools remains closed for months during floods. Again, chars are often fall between districts' jurisdiction causing neglect from the end of administration.

### Socio-Cultural Issues

In char area there is high discrimination of gender. Girls' education not prioritised. Child marriage of girls prevails at high rate in Muslim majority char villages. Hence dropped out rate is high in respect of girls' student in char area. Another major issue to inclusive education in char area is that children with special need are hidden at home and they are not sending to school for education.

### Out-dated Data

The last socio-economic survey was conducted in 2003, hindering targeted interventions. Information regarding people and society of a particular region like char area is much important and necessary in order to formulate plan strategy to progress and development. There is a lack of updated data of char area in Assam that stand as an obstacle in this regard.

### Poor Execution

Government policies often fail to reach remote regions due to logistical challenges. Policies designed at the top level without consultation of char community lead poor execution of the policy. As a remote area, char area experienced a poor execution of developmental policy of the Government.

## 3. Case Study

### a) Char Areas of Barpeta District

A study on char areas of Barpeta district (2022) revealed that during COVID-19:

- Over 70% of students could not access online classes due to a lack of smartphones and internet connectivity.
- Teachers were unprepared for digital pedagogy, exacerbating learning gaps. Teachers were not able to

provide minimum support to children due to lack of proper training in pedagogy and digital tool of learning.

- Government relief measures (e.g., radio-based learning) were ineffective due to poor implementation. Poor parent could not afford a device to its children and government supply was insufficient.

This case highlights how crises magnify existing inequalities in inclusive education.

### b) Bhakuamari Shialmari Char School

A striking example is the Bhakuamari Shialmari LP School in Dhubri:

- **No Official Teachers:** The school had no teachers for three months until boatman 'Amzad Ali' hired two private tutors using his own income.
- **Mid-Day Meal Issues:** The school could not access government mid-day meal funds due to the lack of a teacher, forcing Ali to arrange meals himself.
- **Government Apathy:** Despite multiple requests, the education department failed to appoint teachers, citing the school's remoteness.

This case highlights systemic neglect and the urgent need for policy reforms.

### c) Bidyapara Girls High School Failure

A recent incident where all 72 students of Bidyapara Girls High School failed the HSLC exams (2025) underscores systemic neglect. Possible reasons include:

- **Poor Teaching Quality:** Lack of trained teachers and mentorship programs.
- **Absence of Remedial Support:** No extra classes for struggling students.
- **Community Disengagement:** Parents, often illiterate, cannot assist with academics.

This case highlights how exclusionary practices perpetuate educational failure in char regions.

## 4. Initiatives for Inclusive Education

The Government of Assam plans a localized teacher cadre to ensure educators remain in char areas through its 'Cluster-Based Teacher Recruitment'. As most of the teachers posted in char area are trying to get transferred from char area, this plan expected that teachers posted in char area will remain in a boundary of char region. Modern Curriculum reforms introduce AI, robotics, and financial literacy, but char schools lag in implementation.

## 5. Recommendations for Inclusive Education

To address these challenges, the following measures are proposed:

### a) Strengthening ICT Infrastructure

- Expand the PM e-VIDYA Programme to char areas with reliable internet and device distribution.
- Establish digital learning hubs in char schools with offline resources for students without connectivity.

### b) Teacher Training and Support

- Special incentives e.g., higher salaries, hardship allowances may be introduced for posting in char area.
- Recruitment of local youth of char area as teacher after due training.
- Bilingual education system could be introduced incorporating native language.
- Mandate 'inclusive education modules' in teacher training programs.

- Provide incentives for teachers working in char areas to reduce attrition.

**c) Policy Interventions**

- Prepare a char specific education plan under NEP 2020. A dedicated fund for flood-resistant schools, mobile classrooms, and teacher incentives.
- Separate funding allocation should be made for char area education. Provide special allowances and housing for educators in remote chars.
- Inclusion in SDG monitoring with specific monitors.
- Pilot floating schools in worst affected chars. Introduce boat schools and digital education to counter flooding disruptions.
- Train local youth as special education facilitators.
- Increase disability welfare funding to at least 5% of the state budget.
- Involve local communities in monitoring school infrastructure and inclusion efforts. Local leaders may be involved in school management to improve retention.
- Reinstate and expand pension schemes for PwDs to reduce financial barriers.

Bridging policy gaps in char region of Assam requires hyper local solutions, climate smart infrastructure and strong community ownership. By addressing geographical isolation as the core challenge, Assam can ensure no child is left behind due to riverine disadvantages.

**d) Updated Surveys**

Conduct a char education census or survey for accurate data. The last socio-economic survey of char areas was taken place in 2003. Two decades old surveyed data and out-dated policies fails to address current needs of the people in respect of education and progress.

**Conclusion**

Inclusive education in Assam's char areas remains hindered by infrastructural neglect, teacher shortages, and policy failures. While initiatives like ICT integration and disability welfare schemes exist, their poor implementation leaves marginalized students behind. A multi-stakeholder approach combining government action, teacher training, and community engagement is essential to ensure no child is excluded from quality education.

It also requires a multi-stakeholder collaboration from government policies to grassroots NGO efforts. While recent reforms show promise, a targeted approach addressing geographic, economic, and social barriers is essential. Without immediate action, the cycle of poverty and illiteracy in chars will persist, undermining Assam's broader educational goals.

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