

Education and Social Problems in Assam: Inequality, Child Labour, Delinquency and Drug Abuse

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Abstract

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Education is a major instrument of human development, social mobility and social transformation. However, educational development is closely connected with wider social conditions such as poverty, unequal access to educational resources, parental literacy, geographical disadvantage, child labour, delinquency and substance abuse. This study examines major social problems associated with education in Assam, focusing particularly on educational inequality, equalisation of educational opportunity, minimum educational development, social and adult education, delinquency, child labour and drug abuse. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design based on secondary sources, including government reports, policy documents, legislation, national surveys and relevant academic literature. The findings indicate that educational inequality in Assam is multidimensional and is influenced by economic condition, location, school resources, parental education, gender, digital access and social vulnerability. Recent Assam government data also demonstrate the continuing need for targeted interventions for out-of-school children. The study further finds that child labour can interrupt schooling and reduce opportunities for long-term development, while delinquency and substance misuse require preventive, educational, health-based and rehabilitative approaches rather than punishment alone. Adult and social education can strengthen literacy, health awareness, civic participation, employability and parental support for children's education. The paper concludes that educational development in Assam requires an integrated approach combining equitable access, quality learning, foundational literacy, vocational education, counselling, social protection, community participation and effective implementation of child-protection and education laws.

Keywords: Assam, educational inequality, equalisation of opportunity, child labour, delinquency, drug abuse

1. Introduction

Education is one of the most important instruments of human development and social transformation. It contributes to the development of knowledge, skills, values, critical thinking, citizenship and employability. At the individual level, education can improve social mobility and economic opportunities; at the societal level, it can contribute to social integration, democratic participation and human-resource development. The relationship between education and society, however, is reciprocal. Education influences society, while social conditions influence access to and outcomes from education. Poverty, unemployment, geographical isolation, family literacy, gender inequality, social exclusion, child labour and health-related problems may affect whether children enter school,

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remain in school and acquire meaningful learning. Consequently, educational development cannot be assessed only through enrolment figures.

The National Education Policy 2020 places equity and inclusion at the centre of educational development and emphasises foundational literacy and numeracy, holistic development, vocational education, technology, constitutional values and equal educational opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy also recognises geographical, socio-economic, gender and disability-related barriers to educational participation.

At the international level, Sustainable Development Goal 4 provides a contemporary framework for educational development. SDG 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Its targets include completion of free and quality primary and secondary education, equal access to technical and vocational education, reduction of gender and other disparities, adult literacy and the development of relevant skills (United Nations, 2015). Assam represents an important context for examining these issues because of its geographical diversity and socio-economic complexity. The state contains urban and rural populations, riverine and flood-prone areas, tea-garden communities, geographically remote settlements and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. These circumstances can produce different educational experiences for different groups.

Recent evidence illustrates both educational expansion and continuing challenges. ASER 2024 provides state-level rural evidence on enrolment and learning, while the Government of Assam's Samagra Shiksha programme reports continuing identification and intervention for out-of-school children. For 2026–27, the programme reports 74,452 identified out-of-school children, including 67,499 at the elementary level and 6,953 at the secondary level. It also reports a 2025 situation analysis of 28,363 previously dropped-out children, of whom 13,998 had rejoined formal education. These figures demonstrate that the educational challenge has moved beyond the simple question of opening schools. The continuing task is to ensure retention, learning, equity and reintegration of children who are vulnerable to educational exclusion.

Social problems such as child labour, juvenile delinquency and substance misuse are also connected with educational processes. Children who leave school prematurely may become more vulnerable to labour exploitation or other social risks. Similarly, academic failure, school disengagement, family difficulties, peer pressure and social exclusion can interact with delinquent behaviour. Substance misuse can affect attendance, concentration, academic performance, health and family relationships. Therefore, the present study examines education and social problems in Assam through an integrated perspective.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

To examine the relationship between education and social problems in Assam.

To analyse major dimensions of educational inequality.

To discuss the equalisation of educational opportunities.

To examine contemporary minimum educational development goals.

To assess the role of social and adult education.

To examine the causes and educational implications of delinquency.

To analyse child labour as an educational and social problem.

To examine substance and drug abuse in relation to education.
To identify major challenges affecting educational development in Assam.
To suggest measures for improving educational equity and social development.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive and analytical research design. It is based on secondary data and documentary analysis. The major sources include government publications, education policy documents, statutory provisions, official reports, international reports and selected academic literature.

The study uses the National Education Policy 2020 as a policy framework and examines evidence from ASER 2024, UDISE+ publications, Assam's Samagra Shiksha programme, child-protection legislation, international child-labour reports and India's national substance-use survey.

The analysis is thematic and focuses on seven interconnected areas:

1. educational inequality;
2. equalisation of educational opportunity;
3. minimum educational development;
4. social and adult education;
5. delinquency;
6. child labour; and
7. drug and substance abuse.

No primary interviews or questionnaires were conducted for this paper. Therefore, the findings represent a secondary-data-based analytical assessment rather than a district-level primary empirical study. The limitations of different datasets, including variations in year, methodology and population coverage, are recognised.

For example, ASER is primarily a rural household survey and should not be interpreted as an administrative census of all children in Assam. Similarly, the national substance-use survey provides important baseline evidence but should not automatically be interpreted as a 2026 prevalence estimate.

4. Education and Social Problems in Assam

Education operates within a broader social environment. Several social problems influence educational access, participation and outcomes.

Poverty and Economic Inequality

Poverty is one of the most important barriers to educational equality. Even when school education is formally free, families may face expenses related to transportation, uniforms, books, digital devices, internet connectivity, examination preparation and other educational needs.

Economic inequality can therefore produce unequal educational experiences. Children from economically secure households may have access to private tutoring, digital learning and educational materials, while disadvantaged children may have fewer opportunities.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that educational outcomes are influenced by different forms of capital, including economic, social and cultural capital. This perspective is relevant to understanding why formal equality of access does not always result in equality of educational outcomes.

Parental Literacy

Parents influence children's educational aspirations and learning environment. Parents with limited literacy may face difficulties in supporting schoolwork, communicating with teachers and accessing digital educational resources.

Adult education can therefore contribute indirectly to children's educational development by strengthening parents' literacy, awareness and participation.

Geographical Inequality

Geographical location can affect access to schools, teachers, transportation and digital resources. In flood-affected and erosion-prone areas, disruption to transportation and school infrastructure can further complicate educational continuity. The National Education Policy 2020 recognises geographical disadvantage as one of the dimensions requiring targeted educational intervention (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Gender Inequality

Gender can intersect with poverty, household responsibilities, safety concerns, sanitation, transportation and social expectations. Equal educational opportunity therefore requires more than identical admission rules.

The NEP 2020 specifically provides for a Gender Inclusion Fund intended to support girls and transgender students facing educational barriers (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Youth Unrest and Educational Stress

Young people face academic competition, employment uncertainty, social-media pressures and changing social expectations. An excessively examination-oriented system can increase educational stress. Schools can address these challenges through counselling, career guidance, sports, cultural activities, life-skills education and opportunities for student participation.

Unemployment and Skill Mismatch

Expansion of higher education does not automatically guarantee employment. When academic qualifications are not adequately connected with vocational and professional skills, young people may experience difficulties in entering the labour market.

SDG 4 specifically recognises the importance of technical, vocational and employment-related skills (United Nations, 2015).

5. Educational Inequality and Imbalance

Educational inequality refers to systematic differences in access, resources, participation, quality and learning outcomes.

The major dimensions relevant to Assam include:

- rural-urban differences;
- economic inequality;
- parental educational background;
- gender;
- geographical isolation;
- digital inequality;
- differences in school infrastructure;

- disability;
- language and cultural diversity;
- social disadvantage.

Educational inequality should therefore not be understood simply as the difference between children who attend school and those who do not.

Differences in School Facilities

Differences in classrooms, laboratories, libraries, ICT facilities, sanitation, drinking water, playgrounds and learning materials can affect educational quality.

UDISE+ remains an important national data system for monitoring school education. The Ministry of Education currently provides UDISE+ 2024–25 reports under both existing and NEP-based structures (Ministry of Education, 2026).

Rural and Urban Differences

Urban students may have access to coaching centres, libraries, private tutoring and better connectivity. Rural students may face longer distances, fewer supplementary resources and weaker digital connectivity. However, rural communities should not be described simply as educationally deficient. Rural schools and communities also possess local knowledge, cultural resources and social networks that can contribute positively to education.

Digital Inequality

Digital education can expand learning opportunities, but unequal access to smartphones, computers and reliable internet can reproduce educational inequality.

Therefore, digital education should supplement rather than replace equitable access to physical schools, teachers and learning resources.

6. Equalisation of Educational Opportunity

Equalisation of educational opportunity means creating conditions in which social background does not unfairly determine educational possibilities.

Important measures include:

1. strengthening public schools;
2. providing learning materials to economically disadvantaged children;
3. expanding scholarships;
4. improving rural transportation;
5. providing safe residential facilities where necessary;
6. strengthening girls' education;
7. supporting children with disabilities;
8. expanding vocational education;
9. improving digital access;
10. providing remedial education;
11. strengthening counselling services;
12. supporting children affected by natural disasters;
13. improving teacher availability;
14. strengthening community participation.

The RTE Act 2009 provides the statutory foundation for free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 (Government of India, 2009).

Equalisation therefore requires both legal entitlement and effective implementation.

7. Minimum Educational Development: From MDGs to SDG 4

The original draft concept of “Minimum Development Goal (MDG) in Education” requires updating for a contemporary journal article.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) covered the period up to 2015. The current international framework is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4.

SDG 4 seeks inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Its targets include educational completion, early childhood education, vocational and tertiary access, relevant skills, gender equality, literacy, safe educational facilities and qualified teachers (United Nations, 2015).

In the Assam context, minimum educational development can therefore be understood through the following indicators:

- access to schooling;
- regular attendance;
- foundational literacy and numeracy;
- school completion;
- learning outcomes;
- gender equality;
- inclusion of disadvantaged groups;
- digital literacy;
- vocational skills;
- health and well-being;
- civic and constitutional values.

NEP 2020 gives high priority to foundational literacy and numeracy and aims to shift education from rote learning towards conceptual understanding, critical thinking, creativity and holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020).

8. Social Education and Adult Education

Social education involves developing awareness of social rights, responsibilities, health, citizenship, environment and community life. Adult education extends learning beyond the formal school system.

Adult education can contribute to:

- literacy;
- numeracy;
- financial literacy;
- health awareness;
- digital literacy;
- legal awareness;
- civic participation;
- vocational skills;

- entrepreneurship;
- environmental awareness;
- gender equality;
- family welfare;
- community development.

Adult education is particularly important in communities where previous generations had limited educational opportunities.

Parents who develop literacy and digital skills may become better able to support their children's education.

Social education should therefore be understood as lifelong education rather than simply a remedial programme for illiterate adults.

9. Delinquency and Education

Juvenile delinquency refers broadly to unlawful behaviour involving children or adolescents. Contemporary approaches emphasise that delinquency is influenced by multiple factors rather than a single cause.

Potential factors include:

- family conflict;
- neglect;
- inadequate supervision;
- school failure;
- bullying;
- peer pressure;
- social exclusion;
- substance misuse;
- economic disadvantage;
- exposure to violence;
- lack of constructive recreational opportunities.

The ecological perspective developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) is useful because it explains development through interactions between individuals and multiple environmental systems.

Similarly, Hirschi's (1969) social-control perspective highlights the significance of social bonds and attachment in understanding deviant behaviour.

School Factors

Schools can reduce vulnerability by creating supportive relationships between students and teachers. Excessive punishment, humiliation, exclusion and academic failure may contribute to disengagement. Conversely, counselling, sports, cultural activities, mentoring, career guidance and inclusive classroom practices can strengthen students' connection with school.

Juvenile Justice and Rehabilitation

India's Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, emphasises care, protection, development, treatment, social reintegration and rehabilitation of children in conflict with law (Government of India, 2015).

This legal approach supports the argument that educational and social reintegration should be central to responses to juvenile offending.

10. Child Labour

Child labour is a major social and educational concern because labour can interfere with schooling, health, safety and child development.

International evidence demonstrates the scale of the problem. The ILO and UNICEF estimated that 160 million children were engaged in child labour globally in 2020, including approximately 79 million in hazardous work (ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

Child labour is influenced by:

Poverty

Economic insecurity may compel families to depend on children's paid or unpaid labour.

Educational Exclusion

Poor learning, repeated failure, long distances and lack of family support may increase the risk of leaving school.

Family Occupation

Children may participate in family agriculture, shops or traditional occupations. The legal status of such participation depends on the specific circumstances and applicable law.

Weak Enforcement

Effective implementation of child-labour legislation requires identification, inspection, rehabilitation, educational reintegration and social protection.

India's child-labour framework prohibits employment of children below 14 years, subject to statutory provisions, and prohibits adolescents aged 14–18 from hazardous occupations and processes under the amended legal framework.

Educational Consequences

Child labour can reduce:

- school attendance;
- study time;
- learning achievement;
- physical well-being;
- social development;
- future employment opportunities.

Therefore, eliminating child labour requires both legal enforcement and poverty-sensitive educational interventions.

11. Drug and Substance Abuse

Substance misuse is a public-health, social and educational concern. Alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, opioids, sedatives, inhalants and other psychoactive substances can have different patterns of risk.

India's National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance Use provides important baseline evidence on the prevalence and distribution of substance use in the country (Ambekar et al., 2019).

Because the survey was conducted before 2020, its estimates should not automatically be presented as current 2026 prevalence figures.

Substance misuse can influence education through:

- absenteeism;
- reduced concentration;
- academic difficulties;
- behavioural problems;
- family conflict;
- financial problems;
- health consequences;
- social isolation;
- increased risk of school dropout.

Prevention through Education

Schools can contribute through:

1. evidence-based health education;
2. life-skills education;
3. counselling;
4. peer-support activities;
5. parental awareness;
6. referral to health services;
7. sports and recreational programmes;
8. career guidance;
9. mental-health support;
10. rehabilitation and reintegration.

Prevention should avoid unnecessary stigma. Students experiencing substance-use difficulties should be treated as individuals requiring support and appropriate health services.

12. Findings

The documentary analysis produced the following major findings.

Finding 1: Educational inequality is multidimensional

Economic condition, geographical location, parental education, gender, digital access and school resources interact to shape educational opportunity.

Finding 2: Enrolment alone does not establish educational equality

Children may have access to school but experience different levels of educational quality, learning resources and family support.

Finding 3: Out-of-school children remain a significant policy concern

Current Assam government information identifies 74,452 out-of-school children for the 2026–27 intervention cycle. The state has also developed special training and reintegration mechanisms.

Finding 4: Dropout requires targeted reintegration

The Assam dropout situation analysis of 2025 covered 28,363 previously dropped-out children and reported that 13,998 had rejoined formal education.

Finding 5: Poverty connects multiple social problems

Economic vulnerability may contribute simultaneously to educational discontinuation, child labour, limited digital access and reduced learning opportunities.

Finding 6: Delinquency requires a multidimensional response

Family, school, peer and community environments interact in the development of delinquent behaviour.

Finding 7: Child labour directly threatens educational continuity

Work can reduce attendance, study time and long-term educational opportunities.

Finding 8: Substance misuse affects educational participation

Substance misuse can affect concentration, attendance, health and social relationships, although prevalence must be assessed using current representative data rather than outdated estimates.

Finding 9: Adult education remains relevant

Adult education can improve parental literacy, health awareness, financial capability and civic participation.

Finding 10: Integrated policy is necessary

Education, labour, health, social welfare, child protection and community institutions need to cooperate rather than addressing these problems separately.

13. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that education and social problems are closely interconnected. Educational inequality is partly produced by social inequalities, while educational exclusion can reproduce social disadvantage across generations.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital helps explain why children from different social backgrounds may experience different educational outcomes even when they formally attend the same type of school. Parents' educational experience, language practices, access to books, social networks and familiarity with educational institutions can influence children's educational trajectories.

The Assam context adds a geographical dimension. Educational opportunities can vary according to distance, transportation, environmental vulnerability and availability of educational institutions. This makes targeted and location-sensitive educational planning particularly important.

The current Assam data on out-of-school children demonstrate that educational access continues to require active intervention. The identification of 74,452 out-of-school children for the 2026–27 cycle indicates that universal schooling requires continuous monitoring and reintegration rather than assuming that enrolment automatically produces sustained participation.

Child labour should also be interpreted within this broader framework. Poverty, family vulnerability and educational exclusion may reinforce each other. Removing children from labour without providing adequate educational and social support may not produce sustainable change. Effective policy therefore requires law enforcement together with social protection, school reintegration and family support.

The same principle applies to delinquency. Children who come into conflict with law should not be permanently excluded from educational opportunities. The Juvenile Justice Act's emphasis on rehabilitation and social reintegration supports a child-centred approach (Government of India, 2015). Substance misuse also requires an integrated approach. Punitive approaches alone cannot address the health, family and educational dimensions of addiction. Counselling, health services, prevention education and rehabilitation should form part of a coordinated response.

NEP 2020 provides a useful policy framework because it connects educational quality with equity, inclusion, foundational learning, vocational education, technology, values and holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The study therefore supports a shift from an enrolment-centred model towards an equity-and-learning-centred model.

14. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Public Schools

Government schools should receive adequate teachers, libraries, laboratories, ICT facilities, sanitation, drinking water and learning resources.

Strengthen Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

Children who fall behind should receive early remedial support.

Target Geographically Disadvantaged Areas

Flood-prone, erosion-prone, remote and transport-disadvantaged communities require location-specific educational planning.

Expand Scholarships and Social Protection

Financial support should cover indirect educational costs such as transportation, learning materials and digital access.

Strengthen Girls' Education

Safe transport, sanitation, hostel facilities, scholarships and community awareness should support girls' continuation.

Promote Inclusive Education

Children with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups should receive accessible infrastructure and appropriate educational support.

Expand Vocational Education

Vocational, digital, entrepreneurial and employment-oriented education should be integrated with academic learning.

Strengthen School Counselling

Counselling should address academic stress, bullying, family problems, career uncertainty and substance misuse.

Prevent Child Labour

Child-labour legislation should be effectively enforced alongside social protection and educational rehabilitation.

Strengthen Juvenile Rehabilitation

Children in conflict with law should receive educational, psychological, social and vocational support.

Develop Evidence-Based Drug Prevention

Drug-prevention education should be linked with health services, counselling and rehabilitation.

Expand Adult Education

Adult literacy should be connected with digital literacy, financial literacy, health, legal awareness and vocational skills.

Improve Data Systems

District-level data should be used to identify vulnerable children and monitor attendance, dropout, learning and reintegration.

Strengthen Community Participation

Parents, teachers, local government, social workers, NGOs and community organisations should participate in educational development.

15. Limitations of the Study

The study is based on secondary sources and does not include a primary field survey. Therefore, it cannot establish causal relationships between educational inequality and specific social problems at the individual level.

The datasets used in education, child labour and substance use also differ in methodology and reference periods. Some official data describe specific populations or programme beneficiaries rather than the entire population of Assam. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as an analytical synthesis rather than a statistical prevalence study.

Future research should undertake district-level primary surveys, particularly in rural, riverine, tea-garden and other socially or geographically disadvantaged communities. Mixed-method research combining household surveys, interviews with teachers and students, institutional data and policy analysis could provide more detailed evidence.

16. Conclusion

Education is both a product of society and an instrument for transforming society. In Assam, educational development has expanded opportunities for children and young people, but inequalities associated with poverty, geography, family background, gender, digital access and social vulnerability continue to influence educational experiences.

The evidence indicates that educational inequality cannot be addressed simply by increasing enrolment. Equalisation requires quality learning, foundational literacy, appropriate infrastructure, inclusive education, financial support, digital access, vocational opportunities and effective retention mechanisms.

Child labour, delinquency and substance misuse should similarly be addressed as interconnected social and educational concerns. Preventive education, family support, counselling, health services, social protection and rehabilitation are necessary alongside legal enforcement.

The contemporary educational framework should also move beyond the older MDG terminology and align analysis with SDG 4, which emphasises inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. The principles of NEP 2020 further strengthen the importance of equity, inclusion, foundational learning, vocational education, technology and holistic development.

For Assam, the most sustainable approach is therefore an integrated educational and social-development strategy. Schools cannot solve poverty, child labour, delinquency or substance misuse alone. However, an equitable, inclusive and socially responsive education system can strengthen the capacity of individuals, families and communities to address these problems.

The long-term objective should be to ensure that every child and young person, regardless of economic background, gender, geography or social circumstances, receives meaningful opportunities to learn, develop skills, participate in society and build a dignified future.

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