

Educational Development in the Char Areas of Assam: A Secondary Data Analysis of Access, Infrastructure and Participation

**Pranab Rabi Das¹, Dipjyoti Roy², Sumi Das³,
Nargis Mazumdar⁴, Ritusmita Sarma⁵**

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Adarsha Mahavidyalaya, Eraligool, Sribhumi, Assam, Email: das879016@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Adarsha Mahavidyalaya, Eraligool, Sribhumi, Assam, Email- dipray7833@gmail.com

³M.A. in Economics, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, Email: dsumi014@gmail.com

⁴Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Rowta Degree College, Udalguri, Assam, Email: nargismazumdar2000@gmail.com

⁵M.A. in Education, Pragjyotish College, Guwahati, Assam, Email: ritusmitasarma11@gmail.com

Abstract:

The char areas of Assam are riverine settlements exposed to recurrent flooding, riverbank erosion, geographical isolation and socio-economic vulnerability. These conditions may affect educational access, school infrastructure and continuity of participation. This paper examines educational development in the char areas through a secondary analysis of official reports and relevant academic literature. Its principal empirical source is the Survey of the Educational Attainments of People in the Riverine Areas (Char) of the Brahmaputra, prepared by the UNDP North East Regional Office for the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam. The report covers 3,607 household sample units across six districts and includes indicators of educational attainment, access to institutions, school facilities and flood-related disruption. The analysis finds substantial differences between access to elementary schooling and access to higher educational levels. The survey reports that 13.12% of the population aged six and above in its sample had never attended school and identifies dropout at primary and secondary levels. It also records gaps in drinking water, electricity, usable toilets, libraries and digital connectivity, with facility availability varying by school level. Flood-related damage and interruption further complicate educational continuity. The study concludes that educational development should be assessed not only by the presence of schools but also by distance, functionality, inclusion, progression and resilience. It recommends geographically targeted planning, disaster-resilient infrastructure, improved transition and retention measures, and better integration of school-level administrative data with official char-area boundaries.

Keywords: Char Areas; Educational Access; School Infrastructure; Educational Participation; Flood Vulnerability; Assam.

1. Introduction

Education contributes to human development, social mobility, economic participation and social inclusion. However, educational opportunity cannot be assessed solely by counting institutions. Children must be able to reach schools, attend regularly, progress through educational stages and learn in a safe and adequately equipped environment. Equity and inclusion are central priorities of the National Education Policy 2020, which calls for equitable access to quality education across social and geographical contexts (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The issue is especially relevant in Assam, where the Brahmaputra and its tributaries continually reshape the landscape. Char or chapori settlements are riverine landforms affected by erosion and deposition. Their changing geography can complicate transport, communication, infrastructure maintenance and the delivery of public services. The Government of Assam maintains a notified char-area list and identifies char settlements as a distinct developmental context (Directorate of Minority Affairs and Char Areas, Assam, n.d.).

Historical government reporting indicates longstanding educational deprivation in char areas. The Government of Assam's socio-economic survey of char areas, conducted for 2002–03 and issued by the Directorate of Char Areas Development, reported 2,251 char villages across 14 districts, a total population of 2,490,097 and a literacy rate of 19.31%. It recorded 1,852 lower-primary schools, 574 middle-elementary schools, 218 high schools, eight higher-secondary schools and 18 colleges. The report is dated 25 July 2004, while its tables describe the 2002–03 survey; these figures must therefore be treated as historical rather than current estimates (Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam, 2004, pp. 1–3).

A more directly relevant source is the Survey of the Educational Attainments of People in the Riverine Areas (Char) of the Brahmaputra, prepared by the UNDP North East Regional Office for the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam. The report draws on 3,607 household sample units in six districts—Dhubri, Barpeta, Darrang, Morigaon, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur—and reports educational attainment, distance to institutions, school facilities and flood-related educational disruption (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.). The survey therefore provides char/riverine-specific evidence that can be used more directly than Assam-wide averages.

Flooding and erosion are relevant to education because they may damage school buildings and routes, displace households and interrupt classroom teaching. The Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) maintains flood reports and publishes procedures for repairing and restoring government schools affected by floods (ASDMA, n.d.). Recent research on char households also documents climate-related vulnerability in Assam, although household vulnerability evidence should not automatically be treated as direct evidence of educational outcomes (Saikia & Mahanta, 2025).

A key methodological issue is that UDISE+ provides detailed school statistics, but public summary tables do not consistently identify schools located specifically in dynamically changing char settlements. Accordingly, this paper distinguishes char/riverine-specific survey evidence from broader policy and administrative context. It examines educational access, school infrastructure and participation while avoiding claims that state-level averages represent char-area conditions.

2. Review of Literature:**2.1 Educational inequality and geographical access:**

Educational access involves more than the formal availability of a school. Distance, transport, safety, household resources and the availability of institutions at successive educational stages influence whether children can enter and continue schooling. The Government of Assam's char-area documentation identifies transport and access to basic services as persistent developmental concerns (Directorate of Minority Affairs and Char Areas, Assam, n.d.). The riverine educational-attainment survey adds quantitative evidence on distance to schools and the limited availability of higher-level institutions (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.).

2.2 Socio-economic vulnerability and educational attainment:

Research on char communities connects geographical exposure with broader socio-economic vulnerability. Alom (2024), in a study of char areas in Kamrup district, discusses the interconnection of flood-related displacement, livelihoods and social development. Begum (2018) examines women's education in a char area of Sonitpur district, while Kalita and Yesmin (2025) focus on women's higher education in char areas. These studies make gender and progression beyond elementary schooling important themes, although their findings should be interpreted within the specific settings and methods of each study.

2.3 Floods and educational continuity:

Floods can affect education through school-building damage, inaccessible roads, displacement, loss of learning materials and cancellation of classes. The Assam riverine educational-attainment survey includes a dedicated chapter on flood impacts on education and documents interruptions to classroom teaching, school inundation and use of schools as relief shelters (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.). ASDMA's school-restoration procedures demonstrate that these risks are also recognised within disaster-management administration (ASDMA, n.d.).

2.4 Research gap:

Existing literature discusses educational deprivation, gender, socio-economic vulnerability and flood exposure in char areas, but these dimensions are often considered separately or within particular localities. The present paper synthesises available riverine-specific survey evidence across access, infrastructure and flood-related continuity, while using contemporary administrative sources only as contextual evidence. It does not claim to provide a new survey or a causal estimate.

3. Objectives of the Study:

The study has the following objectives:

- i. To examine the status of educational access in the char areas of Assam.
- ii. To assess the availability of basic educational infrastructure in schools serving char communities.
- iii. To analyse patterns of student participation, enrolment and gender representation across educational levels.
- iv. To identify major educational disparities and challenges affecting educational development in the char areas of Assam on the basis of available secondary evidence.

4. Research Questions:

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. What is the status of educational access in the char areas of Assam?
- ii. What major patterns are evident in the availability of educational infrastructure?
- iii. What does the available evidence reveal about student participation and gender patterns?
- iv. What major structural and environmental challenges influence educational development in the char areas?

5. Methodology**5.1 Design and sources**

The study uses a descriptive secondary-data design. Its principal source is the Survey of the Educational Attainments of People in the Riverine Areas (Char) of the Brahmaputra, prepared by the UNDP North East Regional Office for the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam. The report describes a sample of 3,607 household units across six districts and uses a structured questionnaire to collect data on educational attainment, institutional access, facilities and flood effects (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.). Although the underlying report collected primary household data, the present article treats the published survey as a secondary source.

Additional sources include the historical socio-economic survey of char areas, the Government of Assam's notified char-area information, UDISE+ publications, NEP 2020, and ASDMA documents. UDISE+ is used to describe the administrative indicators available for school education, not as a direct estimate of char-specific conditions unless the source explicitly identifies char-area schools (Ministry of Education, 2024).

5.2 Study coverage and limitations of the data

The riverine survey covers selected villages in Dhubri, Barpeta, Darrang, Morigaon, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur. It should not be assumed to represent every char settlement in Assam. The survey's reference period is described in the report as 2018–2021 in its executive summary. Because char geography changes over time, the survey findings are interpreted as evidence about its surveyed population and period rather than as current estimates for every char.

5.3 Indicators and analysis

The analysis focuses on three dimensions: access (reported availability and distance to educational institutions); infrastructure (drinking water, electricity, toilets, libraries, computers and internet); and participation/continuity (educational attainment, dropout categories and reported flood-related

disruption). Descriptive percentages reported in the source are reproduced with attribution. No new inferential statistics or causal estimates are calculated. Because the source report contains some categories whose denominators and labels require caution, the paper avoids using ambiguous categories as headline findings.

5.4 Ethical and interpretive note

The study does not collect new human-participant data. It relies on published reports. The results are descriptive and cannot establish that floods alone cause dropout or low attainment; these outcomes may also be associated with household poverty, distance, infrastructure, social factors and other contextual conditions.

6. Results and Analysis

Historical baseline verified against the uploaded Government of Assam report. The values below are transcribed from the report's opening summary table (printed p. 1) and consolidated district table (printed pp. 2–3; PDF pages 6–8).

Table 6.1 Historical Profile of Char Areas in Assam: Population, Literacy and Educational Institutions (2002–03)

Indicator (survey year 2002–03)	Value reported
Char villages	2,251
Districts covered	14
Total population	2,490,097
Literate persons	480,807
Illiterate persons	2,009,290
Overall literacy rate	19.31%
Lower-primary schools	1,852
Middle-elementary schools	574
High schools	218
Higher-secondary schools	8
Colleges	18

Source: Directorate of Char Areas Development, Government of Assam (2004, pp. 1–3; survey year 2002–03).

The report's preface is dated 25 July 2004. The population, literacy and institution counts are reproduced as printed; no inference about current conditions or subsequent change is made from this historical baseline.

6.1 Educational attainment and dropout

The riverine educational-attainment survey reports that, among the population aged six and above in its sample, 13.12% were classified as illiterate and 7.90% as literate but never formally schooled. The report records 11.45% as having passed Class V, 9.10% Class VIII, 7.38% Class X and approximately 5.40% Class XII. It also records dropout categories of 7.82% at primary level, 5.94% at secondary/high-

school level, 4.22% at senior-secondary level and 3.46% at college level (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.).

Table 6.2 Educational Attainment and Reported Dropout Categories in the Surveyed Riverine Areas of Assam

Indicator in survey report	Reported percentage
Classified as illiterate (age 6+)	13.12%
Literate but never attended formal school	7.90%
Passed Class V	11.45%
Passed Class VIII	9.10%
Passed Class X	7.38%
Passed Class XII	5.40%
Primary-school dropout category	7.82%
Secondary/high-school dropout category	5.94%
Senior-secondary dropout category	4.22%
College dropout category	3.46%

Source: UNDP North East Regional Office and Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam (n.d.), educational indicators chapter.

These categories are reproduced as reported and should not be added together: attainment and dropout categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the report's presentation.

The figures suggest that the surveyed population experienced challenges in completing successive stages of education. However, the percentages should not be read as conventional cohort transition or dropout rates unless the report's denominator and calculation method establish that interpretation. They are best described as the survey's reported educational-status categories.

6.2 Access to educational institutions

The survey reports that 99% of respondents had access to a lower-primary school, but access did not always mean that a school was located within the respondent's own village. The report states that 45.94% of respondents did not have a lower-primary school in their village and had one within a 1–3 km radius. At the higher-secondary level, 20.14% of respondents reportedly had to travel 10–30 km to reach the nearest institution. For undergraduate/postgraduate institutions, 64.94% were reported to travel 10–30 km and 16.38% more than 30 km (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.).

Table 6.3 Access to Educational Institutions and Distance to Schools in the Surveyed Riverine Areas

Access indicator	Reported finding
Respondents reporting access to a lower-primary school	99%
No lower-primary school in village; nearest within 1–3 km	45.94%

Travel 10–30 km to nearest higher/senior-secondary school	20.14%
Travel 10–30 km to an UG/PG institution	64.94%
Travel more than 30 km to an UG/PG institution	16.38%

Source: UNDP North East Regional Office and Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam (n.d.), educational access section.

The contrast between broad reported access to lower-primary schooling and longer distances to higher-level institutions supports the argument that educational access must be assessed by level, distance and progression rather than by school presence alone.

6.3 School infrastructure

The report identifies gaps in several facilities and shows that the percentages differ substantially by school level. For example, clean drinking water was reported in 52.28% of lower-primary schools, 25.59% of upper-primary schools, 16.15% of high schools and 5.89% of senior-secondary schools. Usable toilets were reported in 51.21% of lower-primary schools, 26.63% of upper-primary schools, 16.13% of high schools and 5.06% of senior-secondary schools. The report also records electricity in 44.14% of lower-primary schools and 31.27% of upper-primary schools; its narrative contains a possible labelling inconsistency for higher-level categories, so only the clearly stated lower- and upper-primary figures are used here (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.).

Table 6.4 Availability of Basic and Digital Infrastructure in Schools across Educational Levels

Facility	Lower primary	Upper primary	High school	Senior secondary
Clean drinking water	52.28%	25.59%	16.15%	5.89%
Usable toilets	51.21%	26.63%	16.13%	5.06%
Computer facility	9.03%	21.64%	47.92%	20.83%
Internet connectivity	12.04%	6.69%	27.42%	53.18%

Source: UNDP North East Regional Office and Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam (n.d.), school facilities section. Values are transcribed from the survey report and refer to its surveyed riverine-area institutions, not all schools in Assam.

The reported facility gaps have two implications. First, basic amenities such as safe drinking water and usable sanitation require attention across educational levels. Second, digital facilities are unevenly distributed: computer access is reported to be more common in high schools than in lower-primary schools, while internet access also varies considerably by level. These figures should be interpreted as a snapshot from the survey period, not as a current estimate of school infrastructure in 2026.

6.4 Floods and educational continuity

The survey documents disruption to education during floods. It reports that 70.26% of respondents travelled to the nearest school by boat during flood conditions. It also records that 55.50% of educational buildings were inundated for 10–30 days on average, while 38.47% were submerged for more than 30 days. The report states that 76.79% of flood-affected educational setups underwent repairs and 5.74% were relocated. Classroom cancellation or disruption was reported for 10–30 days by 58.98% of the surveyed classes and for more than a month by 38.87% (UNDP North East Regional Office & Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, n.d.).

Table 6.5 Flood-Related Disruption to Educational Infrastructure and Classroom Activities in the Surveyed Riverine Areas

Flood-related indicator	Reported percentage
Respondents travelling to nearest school by boat during floods	70.26%
Educational buildings inundated for 10–30 days	55.50%
Educational buildings submerged for more than 30 days	38.47%
Flood-affected educational setups repaired	76.79%
Flood-affected educational setups relocated	5.74%
Classes disrupted/cancelled for 10–30 days	58.98%
Classes disrupted/cancelled for more than one month	38.87%

Source: UNDP North East Regional Office and Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam (n.d.), chapter on the impact of floods on education. These data indicate reported disruption during the survey period; they do not establish a causal effect on long-term attainment.

Flooding may disrupt education through physical damage, unsafe or inaccessible routes, temporary closure, loss of learning materials and displacement. The survey evidence is consistent with the need to coordinate educational planning with disaster preparedness. ASDMA's guidance on repair and restoration of flood-affected government schools provides a relevant administrative framework (ASDMA, n.d.).

7. Discussion

The findings show that educational development in the surveyed char/riverine areas should be understood through access, infrastructure and continuity together. The survey's reported access to lower-primary schools is relatively widespread, yet a substantial proportion of respondents reported that no lower-primary school was located in their own village. This distinction matters: nominal access within a radius does not necessarily mean safe, affordable or reliable access, particularly when transport routes are affected by seasonal floods.

The distance to higher-secondary and undergraduate/postgraduate institutions is a more pronounced concern. The survey's distance figures suggest that educational progression may require travel over

considerable distances. This supports the need for planning that considers secondary-school availability, transport, safe access and locally appropriate support for students moving beyond elementary education. Infrastructure indicators also reveal uneven provision. The reported levels of drinking-water and usable-toilet facilities are low across several school stages in the surveyed areas, while computer and internet access vary by level. The figures underline why school infrastructure should be examined in terms of functionality and adequacy rather than the mere existence of a building. Digital learning can supplement continuity, but it cannot substitute for safe physical facilities, electricity and reliable connectivity. Flood-related findings provide direct evidence of disruption during the survey period. The reported use of boats to reach schools, prolonged inundation of educational buildings and interruption of classes demonstrate that environmental conditions are relevant to educational continuity. Nevertheless, the study does not estimate the independent effect of flooding on dropout or attainment. Household poverty, school distance, access to transport, institutional capacity and social conditions may also contribute. A further issue is the time period of the available evidence. The riverine survey's observations relate to its own survey period and should not be presented as current statistics for 2026. The historical char-area figures from 2002–03 provide a baseline for the earlier situation, but they cannot establish a current trend without comparable repeated observations. Contemporary UDISE+ data can help contextualise school education nationally and at state/district levels, but should only be used for char-specific claims where the relevant school or location is identified (Ministry of Education, 2024).

8. Major Findings

- The riverine survey reports educational-attainment and dropout categories that indicate substantial challenges in completing successive stages of schooling.
- Reported access to lower-primary schools is high, but many respondents indicated that the nearest school was outside their own village.
- Access to higher-secondary and undergraduate/postgraduate institutions often involved substantially longer travel distances.
- The survey reports gaps in drinking water, usable toilets, libraries, electricity and digital facilities, with variation across school levels.
- Flooding was associated in the survey with school inaccessibility, inundation, class disruption and the repair or relocation of educational facilities.
- Char/riverine-specific findings must be distinguished from Assam-wide UDISE+ indicators, and the survey's time period must be stated when reporting its figures.

9. Educational Implications and Recommendations:

9.1 Improve access and progression:

Planning should identify settlements where students must travel long distances to access secondary and higher-secondary institutions. Decisions on school location and support should consider travel time, seasonal access and the transition from elementary to secondary education.

9.2 Strengthen basic infrastructure

Priority should be given to functional drinking-water facilities, usable toilets, girls' toilets, electricity, libraries and appropriate digital facilities. Infrastructure monitoring should assess whether facilities are functional and accessible, not merely recorded as present.

9.3 Integrate disaster resilience into education planning

School disaster plans should cover safe access, temporary learning arrangements, protection of teaching materials, rapid repair, relocation where necessary and continuity of learning during floods. Education authorities should coordinate with ASDMA and local administration.

9.4 Support gender and inclusive participation

Schools should ensure safe sanitation and accessibility for girls and students with disabilities. Where long travel distances create barriers, local planning should consider transport or other context-appropriate support.

9.5 Improve data disaggregation

The Government of Assam and education authorities could explore linking school-level UDISE+ records with the officially notified char-area database and flood exposure information. This would improve identification of underserved settlements and support more precise planning. Any resulting database should record the year and geographical definition used because char boundaries change over time.

10. Limitations

The main empirical source covers selected riverine villages in six districts and should not be generalised automatically to every char settlement in Assam. Its results refer to the survey period, not the current year. The source report presents some indicators with categories or denominators that are not fully clear and contains apparent inconsistencies in a few narrative labels; the present paper therefore avoids using those figures where interpretation is uncertain. The 2002–03 socio-economic survey and the later riverine educational-attainment survey are not directly comparable because their periods, coverage and methods differ. Finally, descriptive secondary data cannot establish causal relationships between flooding, infrastructure and educational outcomes.

11. Conclusion

Educational development in Assam's char areas should be assessed through the interconnected dimensions of access, infrastructure, participation and continuity. The riverine educational-attainment survey provides direct evidence that access to elementary schooling does not necessarily imply proximity to a school within the village, and that access to higher educational levels may involve longer travel distances. It also reports gaps in basic school facilities and substantial flood-related interruption during the survey period.

The evidence supports context-sensitive educational planning that combines improved access to secondary education, functional basic amenities, gender-responsive and inclusive facilities, digital provision where feasible, and disaster-resilient school infrastructure. However, the findings must be interpreted within the geographical and temporal coverage of the source data. Historical figures should not be presented as current estimates, and state-level UDISE+ statistics should not be treated as char-specific evidence unless the relevant schools are identified.

A key future priority is to improve the geographical disaggregation of education data by linking school-level administrative records with officially notified char locations and flood-risk information. Such an approach would enable more accurate identification of underserved settlements and provide a stronger basis for equitable, evidence-informed educational planning.

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