



Right to Education: Myth or Reality? The Scenario in Assam

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to identify that does a child really get the opportunity to enjoy their right to education, especially in developing states like Assam, India. In Assam, thousands of children are deprived of their right to education. Assam is affected by major floods every year, and due to this, many students lose their schools and homes, thus pushing them to the brink of uncertainty. This problem is a very serious problem because thousands of children are unable to get their education right, although they are very keen on completing their education. They are totally deprived of formal education because when floods uproot their schools, they have nowhere to go and get a formal education. This leads to their entrapment as child labour and also in their kidnapping and trafficking. Although the government is trying to tackle these problems individually, it has to be understood that these problems arise out of the inability of children to go to school. The state government has taken lukewarm steps to rebuild the schools destroyed by floods. The reluctance of the government to strengthen the infrastructure of the schools, the lack of accessibility to schools and the overburdening of school teachers with non-academic activities are responsible for children getting denied their right to education. Because of these, children gradually lose their potential and are unable to compete with real-life situations.

Keywords: Assam Flood, RTE

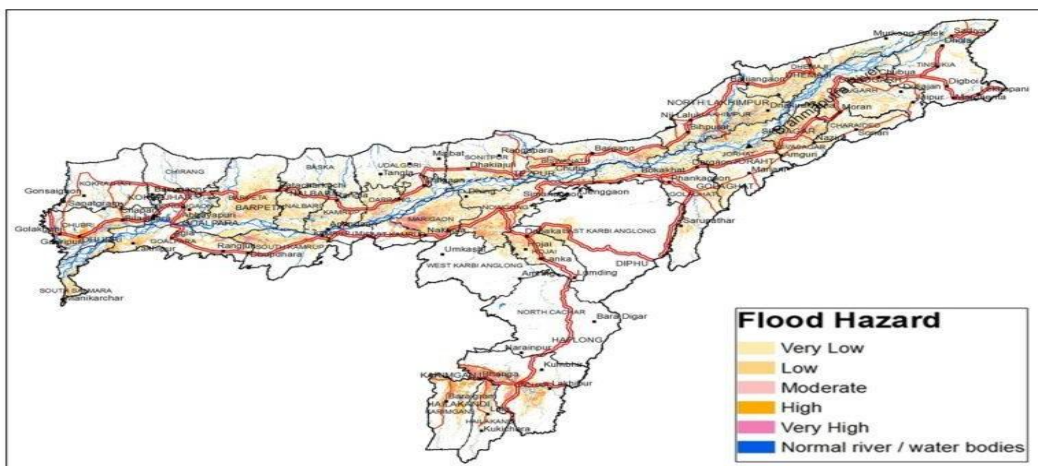
Introduction

Assam is the most popular state in North-East India. Because of the highest rainfall the entire Northeast India is known as a flood-prone zone. In Assam, every year during the time of monsoon season flood and erosion creates a deadly situation and this is because Assam has a network with the river Brahmaputra and Barak and more than fifty numbers of their tributaries ("Flood & Erosion Problems | Water Resources | Government of Assam, India," n.d.). Here, it is considered a very serious problem which mainly affects the overall development of Assam. As per the report of Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), nine districts are considered more flood-affected districts, i.e., Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Golaghat, Majuli and Kamrup

(Metropolitan) (Parashar, 2022).

The field of education is also badly affected by floods. Every year Assam has to face destruction due to floods, which creates a helpless situation for school-going children. Damage to school buildings, books and all the infrastructural elements brings a challenge to carrying a normal academic life. Child education is also affected by the cancellation of schooling, dropout, trafficking, death etc.

Natural disasters have a psychological impact which hinders a student's ability to perform actions in school that always remain unrecognised to a certain extent. After a natural disaster, different kinds of psychological traumas similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have been observed among the survivors which gradually decreases their academic performances too (The Center on Conflict and Development at Texas A&M University, 2016). According to the survey-based data of the State Education Department of Assam, almost every year, more schools are partially or completely damaged due to flood and erosion (Karmakar, 2020). The report of the All-Assam Primary Teachers' Association showed that in 2019 nearly 15,000 Lower Primary (LP) schools were damaged due to floods. The association also reported that lakhs of students have been affected by floods in the same year ("Assam Floods: 15,000 Schools Damaged, Students Future at Stake," 2019). By a report of 21 July 2019, 2,278 elementary schools and 306 secondary schools were damaged by floods (A Staff Reporter, 2019). In 2022, 5.5 million people in 32 districts out of 35 districts were badly affected by floods, and officially, 190 people's deaths were registered. It was assumed that the unreported rate of death was more than the reported one (Bania, 2022).



Source: <https://thewire.in/environment/assams-updated-flood-hazard-atlas-helps-categorise-vulnerability-village>

The Concept of the Right to Education in India and Specifically in Assam

The right to education is considered a basic human right. In 2009, the Right to Education Act was formed under Article 21(A) in India. The main objective of the act was that free and compulsory elementary education should be provided to every child in the age group of 6 to 14. Here, it specifically mentions the duties of the Government, local bodies, and parents to provide basic education to their children at any cost (“Right to Education, Dept. Of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, GoI”, 2021). According to Sam Carlson, The World Bank education specialist of India, “The RTE Act is the first legislation in the world that puts the responsibility of ensuring enrolment, attendance and completion on the Government. It is the parent’s responsibility to send the children to schools in the US and other countries.” There is a separate act for Persons with Disabilities which provides education until 18 years of age. The RTE Act also provides that no children shall be held back, or expelled, and no requirement to pass a board examination until they complete their elementary education. There is also a provision of special training for all school drop-out students to bring them up to the same level. It also requires a survey to monitor those children who are deprived of getting elementary education for their challenging situations.

Assam became the 19th state which has applied the Right to Education Act on 7th July 2011 with the approval of the state cabinet. In Assam, such agencies as The Department of Elementary Education, the State Council for Educational Research and Training and the Axom Sarva Siksha Abhiyan Mission were appointed to implement all the provisions of the RTE Act (“Right to Education,” n.d.). On 14th May 2017 the project Lakshya was launched by the Dibrugarh administration in partnership with Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and UNICEF. The main aim of this scheme was to improve the school environment which will impact 28,511 students from classes 9 to 12. The famous academician Nagen Saikia said that this scheme will be very helpful for students to choose a good career and make a positive contribution to society.

The educational environment in the Northeast region is mostly disturbed by the unfavourable political climate and discrimination (The Bastion Staff, 2017). As per The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER,2022), 98.7% of children have enrolled in school between the age group of 6-14. The enrolment in government schools has increased to 71.9% from 71.1% in 2018. The attendance of the student in primary school has also increased from 73.2% (2018) to 76.4% (2022). Teacher attendance has also increased from 86.9% (2018) to 90.7% (2022) in primary schools (Sentinel Digital Desk, 2023).

Objectives

The study has been conducted:

- To know about the implications of the Right to Education in Assam.
- To know how flood changes the total scenario of Assam and create hindrances in school education.

Methodology

For this study, the researcher has mainly used secondary sources of data collected from online websites, taking interviews on the phone, texting etc. Data are mainly collected from Nagaon district which is also considered the most flood-prone zone among other districts in Assam.

Findings and Discussion

Every year, the devastating flood of Assam creates hindrances in the progress of academic activities, which mainly affects school education. “The devastating floods have not just destroyed properties worth crores and taken lives, but it has also pushed the future of several thousand students into darkness,” said the All-Assam Primary Teachers’ Association (APTA) (NE Now news, 2019). During the flood 4 key problems faced by children in Assam are mentioned below:

- I. It was reported that due to frequent floods, school attendance starts decreasing, whereas the enrollment is approximately 80 percent in lower primary schools.
- II. The frequent flood also affects the learning time of children. During times of flood, schools remain closed for weeks and months, which has no certainty. The children are totally deprived of continuing their learning on time. The teacher and parents both become helpless on how to keep their children engaged with the syllabus and they fail to apply any plan for the children.
- III. For normal growth, playing is very essential for children. Flood creates shortness in the living areas as well as the play areas.
- IV. Due to flash floods, every year, children lose their books and all study materials, which creates a gap in their preparation. These serious consequences fall them to a dark future (“Assam Is Reeling under Floods Again, Here Are 4 Key Problems Faced by Children,” (2017).

One study in the USA shows that natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, erosion etc. harm physical health and mental health as well as education. The negative effects of all these natural disasters can be seen mostly in poor and developing countries. Its effect can be seen in child development as well, which is most persistent for a lifetime or even passed on to the next generation. These scenarios are always neglected due to a lack of

enough funding and political will.

After a disaster, children become more vulnerable and some children require special care, nutrition, special supplies etc. It also creates mental health problems along with physical health and schooling. Lack of fresh drinking water can cause many diseases like diarrhoea and cholera, which spread very rapidly among children. Due to the lack of proper nutrition, children become ill for a long period of time. (Kousky, 2016). In the case of children during the flood, they are disconnected from home, family and friends, which eventually badly affects their physical and mental health. According to *The Print* (31 July, 2022), nearly 20 lakh children were hit by the flood, where 70 children's lives were damaged. A class V student said, "We lost household goods during floods every year, but my sister's death is something I cannot come to terms with. We are devastated, and I cannot even study with all my textbooks lost in the deluge" (*The Print*, 2022).

In the post-flood period, there is a drastic increase in trafficking. Both Nalbari and Kamrup districts of Assam are considered the most vulnerable districts for women and child trafficking, according to a study report by the Shakti Vahini agency. These districts are considered the main source areas for trafficking. A large portion of both districts is situated in riverside areas where people live in very poor conditions, and for this, they often are stricken with traffickers (GOLD, n.d.).

Flood-affected areas are always targeted by trafficking agencies and their main target involves child labour, forced labour, beggary and sexual exploitation. Religious and Charitable Institutions are also involved in trafficking (Nair & et. al., 2019). Many schools were physically damaged. The state govt. of Assam has deposited 1000 rupees to the bank account of 1,01,537 students who had taken shelter in relief camps. The Education Department was also planning to give additional free textbooks to all the flood-affected children by 15 August. UNICEF took the initiative to create alternative learning spaces in 100 damaged schools in four districts Dima Hasao, Cachar, Hojai and Nalbari in collaboration with the child rights organization "Save the Children". Sunita Changkakoti, the chairperson of the Assam State Commission for Protection of Children said, "We had asked the government to make necessary arrangements for providing adequate quantities of baby food, safe drinking water, sanitary napkins and disinfectant items, to make arrangements for sufficient toilets and medical facilities for children, women and adolescents in the relief camps" (*The Print*, 2022). The founder of the NGO "PRIYOBONDHU", Archana Borthakur said that ninety per cent of children could not save their educational materials due to flood. She also suggested arranging some classes in relief camps for those children whose education was disrupted (*The Print*, 2022). A principal of a school in the Nagaon district shared her real experiences through an interview. She said that when the flood comes, it damages all the educational materials of children. Due to the lack of books, they cannot come to school and even they cannot stay at home.

The problem is not limited to floods. The post-flood incidents also create problems like relief camps. People stay in relief camps for a long period of time for their shelter. So, the problem is that the school authority cannot start their regular classes on time due to these kinds of issues. It creates a gap in the academic career of children, and teachers also remain helpless for the sake of the situation. It takes a lot of time to get back to the previous situation, and for this, the academic's work lags. The government funds are not enough for cleaning the school and disinfecting the campus. The interested people and teachers have also contributed something as per their capacities. The health department of the Assam Govt. also organises medical camps for health check-ups of students which is not satisfactory. They do not get the Govt. funds at the right time, and they have to go through a panic situation during the whole season of a flood (personal communication, 18 April 2023).



Source: Photograph by the researcher

North-East Affected Area Development Society (NEADS), a local agency of Assam is taking an initiative to re-build schools in flood-affected areas specifically in Jorhat and Golaghat districts. The organization has also undertaken a project named, "Assam Flood Response 2020 Restoration of WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) in schools. The joint director of NEADS, Tirtha Prasad Saikia said, "The objective of the project is to restore and make the schools functional and child friendly by rebuilding their infrastructure with adequate WASH facilities in both the targeted districts." Red R a non-profit organization in India is providing technical support to the NEADS regarding this initiative (Bhattacharyya, 2020). Another subject teacher of a secondary school in Nagaon district has said, "Education is highly affected by the flood. Students have to leave their residences, due to the damage to their properties like paddy fields, which are the main earning source of the family. This outward destruction creates an inward turmoil of restlessness and insecurity, which results in dropout from school. Discontinuity in the link

of their studies creates a gap which needs much effort from the teachers, students, society and government at large to bring things back to normalcy” (Personal communication, 19 April 2023).

A group of students of Sankardev Higher Secondary School, Nagaon shared their experiences during the recent flood situation– “During flood situation, we have to face so many problems like scarcity of books, proper study materials, lack of academic space etc. We cannot attend our classes for a long period of time, and for this, we feel a lack to cover our syllabus in a specific time. We cannot appear for our exam at the right time. In post-flood situations, we become frequently ill because flood brings many diseases, and due to these effects, most of our friends are unable to attend classes. Every year, flood destroys our study materials and teaching materials, and it is quite impossible to get back those things as per our needs. Most of our friends have to leave school due to their poor economic conditions, and we feel helpless to continue our academic career smoothly after such flood situation (Personal communication, 19 April 2023).

In 2016, Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) with the technical support of UNICEF developed a project named Child-Friendly Spaces for Children (CFS) in any emergencies under the implementation of NSSP. The guidelines of CFS also strongly promote that educational continuity is maintained even after any disaster like flood, erosion and so on, so that children are physically, mentally and emotionally feel secure within their schools (“Child-Friendly Spaces A Practical Planning, Designing & Operationalization Guide for Assam,” n.d.).



Sources: <https://sponsorship.worldvision.org.ph/>

To minimize the dropout rate in the post-flood situation, the first floating elementary school was inaugurated in Manipur’s Loktak Lake in India (“India’s First Floating Elementary School Inaugurated on Manipur’s Loktak Lake,” 2017). Our nearby

country, Bangladesh is known as a flood-prone zone where students can't attend their classroom education most of the time every year. Through the charity of Bangladesh, the boating school concept becomes very popular, where students can get all the classroom facilities, even computer learning facilities too. Mohammed Rezwana, the founder of Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha started his first floating school in 2022. Rezwana said, 'If the children can't go to school for lack of transportation, then the schools should go to them where there is ensured all-around education.' His non-profit organisation now runs 23 boat schools in Bangladesh (Beaubien, 2018). In Assam, the first boating school concept was applied in Mazidbitha, Barpeta district by Jhai Foundation in 2017. Every day, the classes are held for two hours in the evening (Parashar, 2017).



Mazidbitha boating school, Barpeta, Assam
Sources: <https://rb.gy/8pzky>

Conclusion

The paper has tried to focus on the real scenario of the Right to Education in Assam, and where the focus is mainly on the condition of school education in flood-prone areas. Assam is mostly a flood-devastated state where it becomes really difficult to continue regular academic sessions during the time of the flood. The researcher has tried to present a practical scenario which clearly shows that in the monsoon season, it is very difficult to continue formal education in schools, which is very important for a child's academic growth. Every child by birth has the right to become educated on time, so we can see that in Assam how the children are deprived from their school education. The government has taken different kinds of initiatives, which are not enough to cover all the affected children. For the lack of proper monitoring, most of the schools don't get funds on time and even they are unable to get all the aid in the right way. The teacher has not had enough money to invest in cleaning school buildings, making the campus disinfected, buying teaching-learning aids etc. The specific department should be alert specifically during the season of flood to provide immediate remedies to cope with this kind of

situation. There should be enough medical facilities in all the flood-affected areas so that every child gets medicines and treatment at the right time. One thing which still remains untouched is that in this kind of situation, most children are going through severe mental health problems, detected as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), home or family displacement traumas etc. It is very urgent to provide mental health facilities for those children who really need mental health treatment to lead a better future. This will also be very helpful to minimise dropouts from schools. Another problem is that due to uncertain flood relief camps, the school authority has to face a helpless situation. They can't start their academic session again after the flood because of the lack of proper shelter, so the affected people prefer to stay in school buildings. It hampers school education to come back to normalcy. It is the duty and responsibility of the Government and specific authorities to set up relief camps in those areas so that the school authority doesn't face any problems continuing their academic activities. To fill students' academic gap, the teacher must try to manage alternative ways so that their knowledge-gathering process is not compromised. If possible, the teacher must have to apply for modern facilities and there must be provision of special classes. The Government should take the initiative to rebuild all the collapsed school buildings with updated technologies to save the buildings from the strong effects of yearly floods, and they should increase the amount of aid so that the children are not compromised.

Even the government should think of alternative ways to eradicate these kinds of problems. The concept of floating schools brings positive alternative ways to save education in flood-prone areas. In most countries, especially Bangladesh, this concept brings confidence to save education for children so that they can enjoy their educational rights without any loss. In Assam, the floating school concept is developed in one district, which is run by a non-profit organization. In this kind of initiative, the Government should have to collaborate and help them make it accessible for all the affected children. For developing an educated nation and making children educated with all the required facilities, the concept of the Right to Education is very important.

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