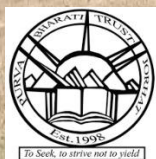


POLICY BRIEF

Public Expenditure on School Education and Quality of Educational Provisions in Assam with Special Reference to the Tea Garden Region Schools

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 **Centre for Budget and Policy Studies**



1. Background and Context

The Tea gardens form the significant portion of the Assam geography and elect about 25-30 representatives to the 126 seats state assembly. This sector also employs nearly 10 lakh garden workers across 856 tea gardens¹ in the state who are critical labour force for the tea production. The tea garden workers are mainly categorised (official) as tea tribes, who form about 20% of the total population of Assam. Welfare of these tea garden workers is one of the important aspects of the development programmes in the state. While many studies have analysed the conditions of the tea workers including their working conditions, remunerations, deductions in pay for workers which are written and unwritten and the adequacy of housing and sanitation facilities, the studies looking into the budget for education of the state Government and the quality of educational provisions in tea garden area as compared to the other areas are few and far in between. With the emerging scenario of implementing the new labour codes, and provincialising of tea garden management schools, it becomes essential to understand this for the development of programmes for school education in tea gardens.

¹https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections/as-assam-goes-to-polls-spotlight-on-10-lakh-tea-garden-workers-121031400263_1.html

This study which is a collaborative study between PBET and CBPS, looks into the public expenditure on school education including its share on the tea gardens area along with a comparison of basic educational parameters like infrastructural facilities, provision of entitlements like Mid-Day Meals (MDM), teacher availability and qualifications in both tea garden and non-tea garden schools to understand the kinds of educational provisioning through budgets and delivery of quality education in tea and non-tea garden area schools. Since tea garden areas were the special focus areas in the study, we defined the tea garden area schools, as schools that were present within the tea estate region. In order to control for diffusion, it was ensured that non-tea-garden area schools were far away from the tea garden schools.

To understand the public expenditure on education in Assam, especially in the tea garden areas, the budgets of different departments with some provisioning for the school education across different 'demand for grants' were used to arrive at the total expenditure on school education during the period of 2015-16 to 2021-22. Further, in order to understand the quality parameters and school-level budgets and expenditures, we undertook a survey of forty-six schools across five districts – Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Tinsukia. The sample comprised of three categories of schools in tea

garden areas – government, aided and tea garden management while two categories of schools were taken in non-tea garden areas i.e. government and aided schools. About 59% (27 schools) of the total schools belonged to tea garden areas, with 6 schools under the tea garden management and rest 41% (19 schools) to non-tea garden areas. The survey comprised of interviews with teachers, Head Masters (HM), school management members and officials from the education department and children studying in class 5, 7 and 9.

2. Public Expenditure on School Education

Expenditure on school education is incurred by the Department of Elementary Education, Department of Secondary Education, Department of Plain tribes and backward classes, Department of Agriculture (Forest school) and Department of Sports and Youth welfare with majority of the expenditure incurred by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The expenditures have been growing at an annual average rate of 11% in nominal terms for the period 2015-16 to 2021-22, which is a positive sign. However, the share of the expenditure as a proportion of total expenditure of the state has been declining since 2015-16 from 19% to 11% in 2019-20. The share of the social sector expenditure as a proportion of total expenditure of the state, has also seen a decline for the same period from 46% to 38%. The

analysis clearly indicates a low priority for social sector including education.

Only about 50% of the expenditures (both revenue and capital) are incurred exclusively on government schools. The Grant in Aid to the aided schools in the form of salary and non-salary accounted form 36% of the total expenditure on education. The expenditure through SS (Samagra Shiksha) which caters to both government and other schools such as aided, tea estate management and local body schools (with the exception of private unaided schools) accounted for 11% while the expenditure on student entitlements (MDM, scholarships, examinations, etc.) which are also meant for similar schools accounted for about 2.5 percent of the total expenditure. Expenditure on management (state and district offices including the regulation of school fee) and regulation accounted for about 1.5 percent of total expenditure. The expenditure that are exclusively for tea garden schools (scholarship and training) accounted for a mere 0.18 percent.

The declining proportion of education as well as that of social sector in the state's total state budget is indeed a cause of concern in Assam, a state that is still far from reaching the goals of universal access and high-quality education at both elementary and secondary stages of education.

3. Quality of Educational Provisioning

The sample schools in the study cater to most marginalised sections. This is especially true for the tea garden area schools where population of tea garden community is higher but their presence is significant in non-tea-garden area as well. The quality of education provisioning and school grants become critical in these schools. While not much difference between the tea garden schools versus the non-tea garden schools were observed in terms of provisioning, certain patterns worth noting emerged. These are:

1. Teachers:

While both tea-garden and non-garden area schools are not fully compliant for the RTE norms for teachers (PTR as well as qualification), the non-compliance is more common in the tea-garden areas as compared to the non-tea-garden areas. Within tea-garden areas, the situation is worse for tea-garden management schools as compared to government and aided schools, although those are also worse than their counterparts in the non-tea-garden areas.

2. Infrastructure:

The analysis of infrastructure including the maintenance and usability shows that the situation in the aided schools is almost alarming and calls for immediate action. The government schools appear to have had provisions but much weaker

maintenance while the tea-garden management schools fare worse in provisions and but better in maintenance. There does not seem to be any notable difference between tea-garden and non-tea garden areas on these grounds.

3. Entitlements:

In case of fulfilling the entitlements, the tea garden area schools, including the tea-garden management schools seem to fare better than the non-tea-garden area schools though the difference is not necessarily high. Overall, the schools in two regions do not seem to be very different in terms of the RTE compliance and creating an enabling environment; improvement is needed in both the regions. However, aided schools continue to fare worse than others in both tea-garden and non-tea-garden areas.

4. School management:

The government officials and other school managers rarely self-introspect and largely indulge only in responsabilising others (parents and community) while the SMCs focus on what they can get from the government rather than discussing the functioning of the school and finding solutions for locally relevant problems.

5. School grants:

There is not much difference between the grants received by the government and aided schools while the tea management schools do not receive any grants from the government except for support in Midday meals and text books. This

hampers their capacity to invest in enabling environment. The infrastructure grant needs to be flexible to accommodate the requirements.

4. Main Features of the Schools

Government schools: These schools have pucca buildings although the number of classrooms is at times inadequate. The maintenance and hygiene is poor. The usability of facilities such as toilets despite presence is also poor. Although these schools also do not fully comply with the RTE norms when it comes to PTR and teacher qualification, they are better placed than the-garden management schools. The non-compliance is higher for the government schools in tea-garden areas as compared to non-tea-garden areas. Although the student entitlements are largely available, the functioning of the school leaves much to be desired. The use of local language is almost absent.

Aided schools: These schools, though not fully compliant, are better than government schools in being compliant to the PTR and teacher qualification norms of the RTE. However, they are much worse in term of infrastructure and its maintenance not only compared to government but also compared to tea-garden management schools. Even though they receive almost all the grants accessible to the government schools, they fare much worse in providing the key entitlements such as

midday meal, uniforms and textbooks to students.

Tea-garden management schools: These schools are the worst in terms of fulfilling the PTR and teacher-qualification related norms of the RTE. They, however, fare better than others when it comes to the maintenance and usability of the infrastructure even though they do not always have the desired infrastructure facilities. These schools also do not receive any grants from the government other than receiving support for the midday meals and textbooks. They report highest use of the local language and better provisioning of the midday meal.

5. Suggestions for Way Forward

Two recent developments need to be reported here. One, the Government of Assam has recently announced that all tea-garden management schools (400+) in the state would be 'provincialised'.²

Two, the state government has also started the process of merging the elementary education and secondary education departments.³ The two separate directorates for elementary and secondary education are to be

² <https://www.time8.in/assam-budget-2022-over-400-schools-in-tea-garden-areas-to-be-brought-under-state-govt/>
<https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-govt-to-take-over-400-schools-in-tea-garden-areas-under-its-ambit-583069>

³ <https://www.northeasttoday.in/2021/11/17/assam-cm-announces-merger-of-seba-ahsec-from-2022/>

merged to form directorate of school education⁴, which appears to be a good move to consolidate the provisioning of school education in the state. Rationalising and re-planning the schools to provide the entire elementary education of eight years and working out a pathway for continuing the secondary education together may become more prudent for managing and better provisioning of education.

However, the findings of this study point towards several issues from the perspective of providing an enabling environment for promoting quality education while fulfilling the RTE norms that need to be addressed while going forward with these measures:

1. Teachers:

The state government now not only has the responsibility of making all schools, including the recently provincialised tea-garden-management schools, RTE compliant in terms of both PTR and teacher-qualification. This translates itself into commitment for a higher recurrent expenditure on education, which means the share of expenditure in the total budget must go up in coming years. This becomes especially critical in the context where the share of the expenditure as a proportion of total expenditure of the state has been declining since 2015-16 from 19% to 11% in 2019-20. The state can also access

⁴ <https://www.ndtv.com/education/merger-of-lower-primary-middle-english-schools-prevent-dropouts-in-assam-chief-minister>

innovative resources available for the purpose.⁵

2. Teacher preparedness:

Considering that the state and aided schools are largely for children from relatively marginalised population groups, it becomes imperative to prepare teachers to teach them with compassion and competence. Parental illiteracy is a challenge that they need to address through their own teaching rather than continuing to identify as a challenge. What emerged from the study is that the government schools are far more restrictive in using local languages and this needs to change. Similarly, considering the pandemic related challenges and the fact that Assam is prone to natural disasters such as floods, teachers also need to be trained in providing localised solutions for education in emergency. All this implies the need for a higher investment in better-designed and more frequent teacher training programmes. Here, Samagra Shiksha funds and knowledge support can play a major role.

3. Infrastructure:

⁵ The Tea board India also has schemes to provide capital grants for educational institutions in tea garden areas that can be used for creation and augmentation of infrastructure. The criteria for grants is that the institution be in tea garden area catering to at least 25% of students from tea garden workers.

The state is highly dependent on aided schools but the level and quality of infrastructure seems to be very poor there in both tea-garden and non-tea-garden areas. The state needs to find ways to influence aided school managements to invest in their infrastructure. This issue may be an important one for the recently provincialised tea-garden management schools, as the level of infrastructure is poor as well. This again translates itself into commitment for a higher recurrent expenditure on education.

4. Infrastructure maintenance, hygiene and entitlements:

The study clearly showed that both government and aided schools do not fare well in maintenance of existing infrastructure while tea garden management schools though limited in the presence of infrastructural facilities seemed to be better in maintaining those. This raises the issue of accountability and development of norms for better maintenance as a marker of school performance. Considering that huge amounts of resources have been and are likely to be invested in creating infrastructure, maintenance become critical for enhancing efficiency on one hand, and for ensuring that these investments really become a source of better school environment. Better maintenance and school functioning would also help in

better performance in provisioning of entitlements for students such as midday meal arrangements, uniform distribution and scholarship enrolments.

5. School management:

Like school teachers, it is also important for the school managers (including administrators and community) to engage with the issue of marginalisation to find a solution rather than viewing it as a continued challenge and disadvantage. Both administrators and community bodies such as SMCs need to be trained in problem-solving skills taking the local issues into account rather than just knowing about their procedural roles and responsibilities, here too, Samagra Shiksha can play an important role. Coupled with empowered teachers, this will make the school system resilient and empowered.

Apart from these, consultations with various stakeholders revealed recommendation likes - inclusive policies by the school management, especially tea garden management like compulsory transportation for students who come from far and have to travel long distances, payment of wages (as compensation) to SMC members when they attend SMC meetings, inclusion of helper teachers from the local community to facilitate the use of home language in classroom processes.

Developed by Jyotsna Jha, Neha Ghatak, Madhusudhan B. V. Rao and Achala S Yaraseeme based on the study:

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