Effective Teaching and Education for Undergraduate Students in Assam and Northeast India: A Review

Dr. Gakul Kumar Das [1], Dr. Dipen Tayung[2*], Dr. Gitika Kalita [3], Dr. Anosh Narzary [4], Dr. Jadav Basumatary[5]

[1]Associate Professor, Department of Assamese, Darrang College, Tezpur, Assam, India Email: gakuldas07@gmail.com

[2]Assistant Pofessor, Department of Philosophy, Bhattadev University, Bajali, Assam, India, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8216-0883 Email: drdipentayung1980@gmail.com

[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Bhattadev University, Bajali, Assam, India,

Email: gitikabarmaa@gmail.com

[4]Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Bengtol College, Chirang, Assam, India,

Email: anoshnarzary1@gmail.com

[5]Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Bhattadev University, Bajali, Assam, India,

Email: jadavbasu1967@gmail.com
*Corresponding Author: Dr. Dipen Tayung

*Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy Bhattadev University, Bajali, Assam, India ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8216-0883 Email: drdipentayung1980@gmail.com

HOW TO CITE:
Gakul Kumar Das, Dipen Tayung, Gitika Kalita, Anosh Narzary, Jadav Basumatary (2026). Effective Teaching and Education for Undergraduate Students in Assam and Northeast India: A Review. International Journal of Special Education, 41(8s), 1277-1293

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ABSTRACT:

The quality of undergraduate education in Assam and Northeast India faces distinctive challenges stemming from infrastructural limitations, socio-economic disparities, and policy implementation hurdles. Despite various government initiatives, the region struggles with issues such as inadequate facilities, limited digital access, and significant gender disparities in technical education. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for robust digital infrastructure, as online learning has become essential yet inaccessible for many students due to poor internet connectivity and insufficient digital training.

This review synthesizes the existing literature on educational conditions in Northeast India, focusing on factors that influence the effectiveness of teaching and education for undergraduate students. Key areas of analysis include the role of public-private partnerships (PPP) in enhancing educational infrastructure, the digital divide, and the implications of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The findings underscore the importance of holistic strategies that encompass infrastructure development, curriculum localization, digital literacy, and skill- based learning. Such strategies are essential to make education more inclusive, accessible, and relevant to the socio-economic needs of Assam and the Northeastern states. This review aims to provide a foundation for informed interventions that address both the

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immediate educational needs and long-term development goals of the region.

Keywords: Education, Teaching, Students, Infrastructure, Socio-economic, Gender.

1. Introduction

Education serves as a crucial pillar of socio-economic development and cultural preservation, and in the context of Northeast India, particularly Assam, it holds transformative potential. This region, with its rich cultural heritage and unique geographical setting, faces various educational challenges, including limited resources, socio-economic disparities, and infrastructural inadequacies. Historically marginalized and isolated, the Northeastern states have experienced lower economic growth, which has influenced the quality and accessibility of education for undergraduate (UG) students. For students in Assam, these factors create a complex educational landscape characterized by significant disparities in opportunity, access, and quality compared to other regions of India.

While national education reforms aim to uplift educational standards across the country, regional specificities in Assam and the Northeast require more tailored approaches. Factors such as rural-urban divides, lack of digital access, gender inequalities, and shortages in skilled educators demand customized solutions. Undergraduate education in particular faces challenges that impact students' academic success and employability, including outdated curricula, lack of vocational training, and inadequate digital learning support(Saikia, 2024).

Challenges in UG Education in Assam and Northeast India:

Undergraduate education in Assam is affected by multiple, intertwined issues:

- **Infrastructural Gaps:** Many institutions lack adequate physical facilities, educational resources, and laboratory equipment. Remote locations often have poor road connectivity, making it difficult for students in rural areas to access higher education institutions(Das & Mukherjee, 2017).
- **Socio-economic Barriers:** Widespread poverty and low-income levels limit educational aspirations and affordability, affecting students' ability to pursue higher education(Bandyopadhyay, 2014).
- **Digital Divide and COVID-19 Impact:** The recent shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed severe digital limitations in the region. Poor internet connectivity, high costs of data, and limited digital literacy created barriers to effective online education, impacting both teachers and students (Borah & Bhattacharjee, 2023).
- **Gender Inequality in Technical Education:** Socio-cultural barriers and limited institutional support have contributed to the low enrolment of women in technical and vocational education, further widening the regional gender gap (Choudhury & Kumar, 2022; Gupta, Singhania, & Shrivastav, 2023).

2. Significance and Objectives of the Review

This review aims to critically examine the existing literature on these challenges to provide insights into effective strategies for enhancing undergraduate education in Assam and Northeast India. Key questions addressed in this paper include:

1. How can public-private partnerships contribute to improving educational infrastructure?
2. What are the primary digital barriers, and how can they be addressed to make online education more effective?
3. What steps can be taken to ensure gender inclusivity, particularly in technical education?

4. How is the New Education Policy 2020 affecting education in Assam, and what additional support is required for its effective implementation?

Scope of the Paper

Through a comprehensive review of literature, this paper explores the critical factors that influence effective teaching in this region, highlighting the importance of public-private partnerships, digital infrastructure, vocational training, and policy adaptation. The findings provide a basis for targeted strategies that address both the immediate and systemic issues within the region's educational landscape. By understanding and addressing these challenges, policymakers and educators can work toward a more inclusive and effective educational environment that empowers students and supports regional development.

3. Educational Infrastructure and Public-Private Partnerships

Educational infrastructure forms the backbone of quality teaching and learning environments, yet institutions across Assam and Northeast India face significant deficits in this area. Research has shown that inadequate physical facilities, limited access to essential resources, and logistical constraints have contributed to a lag in the educational progress of the region. Many institutions lack basic facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and technology-equipped classrooms, hindering students' academic engagement and practical learning opportunities (Ullah, 2015). Moreover, geographic isolation, compounded by poor transportation and communication networks, restricts students in rural areas from accessing educational institutions, further amplifying educational disparities in the region (Ram & Irfan, 2018).

Challenges in Educational Infrastructure:

The challenges in educational infrastructure are multifaceted. A lack of funding limits the ability of educational institutions to expand facilities or modernize teaching resources. According to recent studies, many rural colleges in Assam and neighboring Northeastern states operate in substandard conditions, with classrooms often overcrowded and lacking appropriate learning materials. This lack of infrastructure directly impacts the quality of education, with students unable to fully engage in practical or experiential learning. The shortage of modern laboratory facilities, for instance, restricts science and technology programs from achieving their intended outcomes, leaving graduates underprepared for industry demands (Das & Mukherjee, 2017; K. J. Singh, 2018).

Role of Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) have emerged as a potential solution to improve educational infrastructure by leveraging private sector resources and expertise. In the context of Assam and Northeast India, PPPs offer a pathway to address funding limitations and enhance the quality and accessibility of higher education. Through PPPs, private entities can collaborate with public institutions to provide infrastructural support, establish technical and vocational centres, and introduce modern technologies that may otherwise be unaffordable for public institutions. These collaborations can help mitigate regional challenges by supporting the creation of well-equipped institutions that meet the demands of contemporary education(Prakash, 2023).

Some states, such as Tripura, have implemented PPP initiatives aimed at improving technical education by setting up training centres and institutes in collaboration with industry players. These institutions, supported by private investment, offer specialized programs that not only prepare students with relevant skills but also align with local employment needs. Such efforts have inspired similar initiatives in Assam, although the adoption of PPPs remains limited. Greater regulatory support and funding incentives are needed to encourage more extensive involvement of the private sector across the region (Ullah, 2015).

Benefits and Challenges of PPPs in Educational Development:

The advantages of PPPs are numerous, particularly in regions where public funding alone cannot sustain infrastructure demands. By pooling resources and sharing expertise, PPPs enable public institutions to upgrade their facilities, introduce cutting-edge technology, and expand program offerings that meet both educational and economic objectives. Furthermore, PPPs can introduce specialized learning environments, such as skill development zones, that provide students with industry-relevant training and improve employability outcomes (Rahman,2021).

However, the challenges of implementing PPPs in Assam and the Northeast are substantial. Bureaucratic hurdles, regulatory delays, and political uncertainties often complicate the establishment of effective PPP models. Additionally, rural and tribal areas may struggle to attract private investment due to logistical constraints and lower market potential. Studies indicate that for PPPs to succeed, state governments must create a conducive environment by simplifying regulations, ensuring fair contractual terms, and fostering transparency to build trust with private partners(Sarmah, 2009; Swarupa & Choudhury, 2023).

Case Studies and Successful PPP Models:

An analysis of successful PPP models within the region reveals promising outcomes. For instance, Assam has piloted several PPP projects focused on vocational training, partnering with organizations to offer skill-based courses in IT, agriculture, and health sciences. These projects, though limited in scale, have shown a positive impact on student employability and skills acquisition. By aligning with local industries and integrating hands- on learning, these partnerships have created a blueprint for scalable models that could be replicated across the region (Sarmah, 2009; Swarupa & Choudhury).

Moreover, Tripura's initiatives to establish technical training centres in collaboration with industry experts serve as a model for enhancing technical education accessibility. These centres offer short-term and diploma courses aligned with local job market requirements, reducing the mismatch between educational outcomes and employment needs. This approach not only benefits students but also addresses regional workforce gaps, highlighting the broader socio-economic advantages of PPPs (Vedhathiri & Ramadass, 2020).

Overall, public-private partnerships present a viable pathway to strengthen educational infrastructure in Assam and Northeast India. While promising, the expansion of PPPs requires committed regulatory support and transparent processes to attract and retain private investment. A systematic approach, guided by state-level policies that encourage PPPs, could foster an environment where quality education is accessible to all students, especially those in underserved areas. By prioritizing PPPs and developing region-specific strategies, Assam and the Northeastern states can overcome infrastructural limitations and advance toward an educational model that supports both student success and regional development(Dash, 2023; Prakash, 2023).

3.1 Gender and Access to Technical Education

Gender disparities in technical education remain a pressing issue in Assam and Northeast India, where social norms and infrastructural limitations often restrict women's access to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and vocational fields. In comparison to other regions of India, Assam and its neighboring Northeastern states have lower female enrolment in technical and vocational programs, which significantly impacts the representation of women in regional labour markets, particularly in technical industries (Dey & Srivastava, 2022; Phukan & Gogoi, 2013). Addressing these barriers is essential for promoting educational equity and harnessing the full potential of the workforce in this developing region.

Barriers to Female Participation in Technical Education:

Several socio-cultural factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in technical education. Traditional gender roles, which often prioritize family responsibilities over career ambitions for women, discourage young women from pursuing technical and vocational studies. Families in rural communities may perceive technical education as an unsuitable path for women, especially due to its association with male-dominated fields such as engineering, mechanics, and information technology (Sarma & Das, 2020). This cultural bias not only limits opportunities for individual women but also perpetuates a gendered division of labour that limits the diversity and adaptability of the regional workforce.

In addition to cultural barriers, infrastructure challenges within educational institutions further hinder female participation. Many technical institutions lack necessary facilities such as separate restrooms, safe transport, and hostel accommodations for women, making it difficult for female students to access technical education, particularly in remote areas. The absence of female faculty members and mentors in technical fields also contributes to an unsupportive environment, where young women lack role models and guidance, discouraging them from pursuing or excelling in technical education(Little, 2019).

Importance of Gender-Inclusive Policies in Technical and Vocational Education:

Research underscores the economic and social benefits of increasing women's participation in technical fields, particularly as the demand for skilled labour grows in Northeast India. Ensuring that women have equitable access to technical education not only supports gender equality but also strengthens regional economic development by creating a more diverse and skilled workforce. In Assam, where agriculture, IT, and health sectors are growing, women's participation in technical training can fill vital skill gaps and enhance productivity in these areas (Dey & Srivastava, 2022; Phukan & Gogoi, 2013).

Gender-inclusive policies are crucial to addressing these disparities. Programs that encourage female enrolment in technical education—through scholarships, mentorships, and industry internships—can play a significant role in reducing gender biases and supporting women's academic and career aspirations. Additionally, awareness campaigns and counselling initiatives that target rural families could help shift socio-cultural perceptions and demonstrate the value of women's contributions in technical and vocational fields(Hill, Corbett, & St Rose, 2010).

Strategies for Promoting Gender Inclusivity:

Several strategies can enhance gender inclusivity in technical education across Assam and Northeast India. First, creating dedicated scholarships and financial aid programs for women pursuing technical education can alleviate financial constraints, which often disproportionately affect female students. These scholarships not only promote access but also act as incentives for women to explore fields traditionally dominated by men.

Furthermore, establishing mentorship programs with female industry professionals can help guide and inspire female students, providing them with role models who exemplify success in technical fields. Studies suggest that mentorship increases retention rates among female students by building a support network that mitigates feelings of isolation or marginalization in male-dominated classrooms (Lopez & Duran, 2021; Meyer, 2024). Programs can also incorporate internships or hands-on training that aligns with local industry needs, thereby connecting women with future employment opportunities.

Building inclusive infrastructure is equally important. Educational institutions should prioritize creating safe and supportive learning environments with essential facilities such as women's hostels, separate restrooms, and secure

transportation options. These changes are necessary to foster a sense of safety and belonging, making it easier for women to pursue technical education without logistical or safety concerns(Hill et al., 2010; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Herring Watson, Gishbaugher, & Wendt, 2021).

Addressing gender disparities in technical education is key to advancing both educational equity and regional workforce development in Assam and Northeast India. By fostering a gender-inclusive environment that includes scholarships, mentorships, and supportive infrastructure, institutions can encourage more women to pursue technical fields, thereby creating a more diverse and skilled labour force. This approach not only empowers individual women but also supports the socio-economic advancement of the entire region, highlighting the importance of inclusive educational policies in the journey toward equitable development (Gupta et al., 2023; Little, 2019).

3.2 New Education Policy 2020 and Regional Adaptation

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced by the Government of India, marks a significant reform in the country's educational landscape, aiming to make learning more flexible, inclusive, and relevant to India's diverse socio-economic contexts. The policy emphasizes regional adaptability, inclusive curriculum, and skill development, which align well with the educational needs of Assam and Northeast India. However, successful implementation in these areas is met with obstacles, including limited resources, awareness gaps, and logistical challenges, particularly in rural and tribal regions (Bezbarua, 2022; P. Gogoi & Das, 2021; Jamoh, Mossang, Gao, & Dupak, 2024).

Goals of NEP 2020 Relevant to Northeast India:

NEP 2020 prioritizes foundational literacy and numeracy, vocational training, and digital education—areas that are critical for the advancement of education in Assam and the Northeastern states. Additionally, the policy emphasizes multilingualism and cultural inclusivity, encouraging the incorporation of local languages, heritage, and traditions within the curriculum. For Assam and Northeast India, this aspect of NEP 2020 holds particular importance, as these regions are home to diverse ethnic communities with unique languages and cultural practices. By promoting an education system that values regional heritage, NEP 2020 fosters cultural pride and strengthens regional identity, which can have a positive impact on students' engagement and retention rates (Department of History, 2024-25; Jamoh et al., 2024).

NEP 2020 also calls for flexible curricular pathways, allowing students to pursue interdisciplinary learning and explore vocational training alongside traditional academics. For undergraduate students, this approach provides more career-oriented education, aligning with the job market demands of the region. Given Assam's growing sectors, such as agriculture, healthcare, and information technology, the focus on vocational training in NEP 2020 supports the development of a skilled workforce tailored to the region's economic needs (Boruah, 2023; Jamoh et al., 2024).

Challenges in NEP Implementation in Assam and Northeast India:

While NEP 2020 provides a progressive framework, its implementation faces several hurdles in Northeast India. One significant challenge is the lack of infrastructure and educational resources needed to support curriculum changes and digital learning (Saikia, 2024). Many institutions lack access to basic facilities, such as updated libraries, laboratories, and computer labs, which are necessary for delivering an interdisciplinary and skill-based curriculum. Additionally, digital infrastructure is limited, with inconsistent internet access and low digital literacy rates hindering the shift to online and blended learning models, which are integral to NEP's vision (Rahman, 2021).

Awareness and training are other critical factors impacting the NEP rollout in Northeast India. Teachers, administrators, and students in rural areas often have limited awareness of NEP's objectives and benefits, making it challenging to adopt new methodologies or adapt to curriculum changes. A study conducted in Assam found that a substantial proportion of teachers felt unprepared to implement NEP guidelines, citing a need for professional development and pedagogical support to integrate interdisciplinary learning and digital tools into their teaching practices (Sarma & Das, 2020). This skill gap among educators hinders effective policy implementation and affects the quality of education delivery in classrooms.

Promoting Regional Languages and Local Culture:

NEP 2020 encourages teaching in local languages up to the fifth grade and the inclusion of regional history and culture in school curriculums. In Assam and Northeast India, where diverse languages and ethnicities are prevalent, this policy has the potential to foster a sense of cultural pride and reduce dropout rates, as students may feel more connected to the curriculum. Teaching in local languages also improves comprehension, especially for students in rural and tribal areas where Hindi or English proficiency may be limited (Jamoh et al., 2024).

However, implementing multilingual education presents practical challenges. The region's linguistic diversity means that educational institutions require resources for developing localized content and recruiting multilingual teachers. Additionally, teacher training in multilingual pedagogy is crucial to ensure effective language-based instruction. Without such resources and training, the intended benefits of multilingual education may remain unachieved, further highlighting the need for targeted investment to support NEP's cultural inclusivity goals (Dkhar & Kakoty; Jamoh et al., 2024; Singha, 2023).

Suggestions for Effective NEP Implementation in Northeast India:

To facilitate NEP implementation in Assam and Northeast India, several strategic interventions are recommended:

1. **Infrastructure Investment**: Building and upgrading school and college facilities, including libraries, labs, and digital access points, can create an environment conducive to interdisciplinary learning.

2. **Teacher Training Programs**: Specialized training workshops for teachers can enhance pedagogical skills, enabling them to deliver NEP-compliant curricula effectively. Additionally, teacher exchanges with institutions in other states can help educators learn best practices.

3. **Localized Curriculum Development**: Collaborating with local scholars and cultural organizations to create region-specific content can ensure that the curriculum aligns with the linguistic and cultural diversity of Northeast India. This approach can make learning more engaging and relevant for students.

The New Education Policy 2020 represents a transformative framework with the potential to address educational disparities in Assam and Northeast India. By prioritizing regional inclusivity, cultural relevance, and skill-based learning, NEP 2020 aligns well with the educational needs of the region. However, practical implementation requires addressing infrastructural, digital, and training-related challenges. With targeted investment and region-specific adaptations, NEP 2020 can foster an educational ecosystem that empowers students and contributes to socio-economic development in Northeast India.

3.3 Digital Learning and the Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of digital learning infrastructure, highlighting both its potential and its limitations in regions with existing connectivity and resource challenges. Assam and Northeast India were

significantly affected by this shift, as the sudden need for online education exposed deep-seated digital divides that impeded equitable access to learning. For undergraduate (UG) students in these regions, the lack of internet connectivity, digital devices, and digital literacy emerged as critical barriers, preventing many from fully participating in virtual classrooms. As digital learning becomes an integral part of modern education, addressing these gaps is essential for long-term educational improvement in Northeast India (Rahman, 2021; Saikia, 2024).

Barriers to Digital Education in Northeast India:

Several interrelated barriers have restricted the successful adoption of digital learning in Assam and other Northeastern states. The first is **inadequate internet infrastructure**. According to studies, internet connectivity in Northeast India is significantly lower than the national average, with rural areas particularly undeserved. This lack of connectivity makes it challenging for students to access online classes, submit assignment, or engage with digital learning materials. Even in urban areas, internet speed and reliability are often insufficient to support high-quality video streaming, a crucial component of online education (Saikia, 2024).

The second major barrier is **limited access to digital devices**. Many students, especially those from low-income families, lack personal devices such as laptops, tablets, or smartphones, which are essential for online learning. Data from recent surveys indicate that, during the pandemic, nearly 40% of students in rural areas of Assam were unable to participate in online classes due to device shortages. Although some families own smartphones, they are often shared among multiple family members, limiting everyone's access to online resources (Rahman, 2021). The high cost of internet data plans adds an additional financial burden, making digital learning unaffordable for many households (Das & Mukherjee, 2017).

A third challenge is **digital literacy**, particularly among educators and students who are unfamiliar with digital tools. The rapid shift to online education during COVID-19 left little time for training, resulting in a steep learning curve. Many teachers and students were unprepared to navigate online platforms or use digital learning tools effectively. The lack of experience with technology affected the quality of online education, with teachers struggling to adapt traditional teaching methods to a digital format (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020; Saikia, 2024). As a result, students' learning outcomes were compromised, and engagement levels decreased, with some students reporting difficulties in following online lectures due to technical and instructional challenges.

Impact on UG Education during COVID-19:

The transition to online learning had profound implications for UG education in Assam and Northeast India. Approximately 46.2% of students surveyed reported that emergency online learning was only partially effective, citing issues like poor internet access, high costs, and limited teacher-student interaction as barriers to effective learning (Sarma & Das, 2020). The absence of hands-on, practical learning opportunities, particularly in science and technical fields, further hampered students' ability to gain critical skills required for their fields of study.

The digital divide also exacerbated existing inequalities in educational access. Students from urban, affluent families with access to high-speed internet and personal devices were able to continue their studies relatively seamlessly, while those from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds faced disruptions. This disparity has long-term implications, as it widens the achievement gap and limits opportunities for students in underserved communities.

Strategies to Bridge the Digital Divide:

To address the digital divide in Assam and Northeast India, strategic investments in digital infrastructure are essential. Expanding internet

connectivity in rural areas through government-funded projects or public-private partnerships could ensure broader access to online education. Programs like Bharat Net, which aims to connect India's rural areas with high-speed internet, could be instrumental in reducing digital barriers if effectively implemented in the Northeast.

Another critical strategy is improving **access to digital devices**. Subsidized devices for students from low- income families and funding initiatives that provide educational institutions with shared digital resources could alleviate device shortages. Some states have initiated programs to distribute tablets or laptops to students, a model that could be replicated across Assam and other Northeastern states to support digital inclusivity.

Finally, **digital literacy programs** for both students and teachers are necessary to build a foundation for sustainable digital education. Training programs that equip teachers with skills to use digital platforms and develop online teaching strategies can enhance the quality of virtual learning. Workshops and tutorials for students can also improve their ability to engage with digital tools, increasing their participation and performance in online education. The integration of digital literacy into the curriculum from an early age would help bridge knowledge gaps and prepare future generations for a tech-driven educational landscape.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide in Assam and Northeast India, revealing the urgent need for investments in digital infrastructure, affordable access to devices, and digital literacy. For UG students in particular, these challenges disrupted learning and intensified educational inequalities. Addressing these barriers through comprehensive, region-specific strategies can create a more inclusive and resilient education system that ensures all students, regardless of location or socio-economic background, have access to quality digital education. By bridging the digital divide, Assam and the Northeastern states can unlock the potential of digital learning to support educational growth and development across the region (Saikia, 2024).

3.4 Vocational Education and Skill Development

Vocational education and skill development are essential components of an education system aimed at fostering job readiness and economic self-sufficiency, particularly in regions with limited employment opportunities. In Assam and Northeast India, where traditional education often fails to translate into marketable skills, vocational training offers a pathway to economic independence for students. However, vocational education faces challenges such as limited enrolment, inadequate facilities, and a lack of alignment with local industry needs. Addressing these issues is crucial for empowering students with practical skills and supporting regional workforce development (Pavlova, 2008; S. Singh & Agarwal, 2024).

Challenges in Vocational Education and Training (VET):

In Assam, several factors inhibit the effectiveness of Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs. A primary challenge is low enrolment due to socio-cultural perceptions that view vocational courses as less prestigious than academic degrees. Many students and parents prioritize conventional degrees in hopes of securing government jobs, which are highly valued in Northeast India. This mindset restricts interest in skill- based education, despite the growing need for practical skills in various industries (Naraginti & Kichu, 2022; Phukan & Gogoi, 2013).

Infrastructure limitations also hinder the development of VET programs. Many vocational training centres lack updated tools, equipment, and modern facilities necessary for teaching industry-relevant skills. The absence of well-equipped workshops and laboratories particularly impacts technical fields such as information technology, healthcare, and automotive repair. These deficiencies reduce the effectiveness of vocational training and leave

students underprepared for the practical demands of the job market(Walia & Darlong, 2023).

Furthermore, limited industry linkages result in skills mismatches, where students trained in specific fields struggle to find jobs that match their qualifications. Industry partnerships are crucial for aligning vocational curricula with real-world requirements, but such collaborations are minimal in Assam. As a result, students often complete vocational programs without the practical experience or industry connections needed to secure employment, perpetuating the cycle of underemployment in the region (Rahman, 2021).

Benefits of Vocational Education for Regional Development:

Despite these challenges, vocational education holds significant potential for socio-economic development in Assam and Northeast India. As traditional jobs become increasingly scarce, VET can provide students with practical skills that make them employable in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, healthcare, and small-scale industries. These sectors are especially relevant in Northeast India, where opportunities for skilled workers in these fields continue to grow (Naraginti & Kichu, 2022).

In agriculture, for example, vocational training can equip students with skills in modern farming techniques, agro-processing, and sustainable practices, directly contributing to productivity improvements and rural development. Similarly, the tourism sector, with its potential for growth in Northeast India, can benefit from trained individuals skilled in hospitality management, eco-tourism, and customer service, which can attract both domestic and international tourists to the region(Jones, 2013).

Strategies for Enhancing Vocational Education:

To maximize the benefits of vocational training in Assam, several strategic interventions are needed:

a) **Strengthening Industry Partnerships**: Creating partnerships with local industries can make VET programs more relevant and market-oriented. Through collaborations, industries can provide students with hands-on training, internships, and job placements, aligning educational outcomes with employment opportunities. A successful example of this is Tripura's collaboration with local industry experts to design vocational courses based on regional economic needs, which has improved employment rates for graduates (Vedhathiri & Ramadass, 2020).

b) **Modernizing Training Facilities**: Upgrading the infrastructure of vocational training institutes is essential for providing high-quality education. Equipping institutions with modern tools and technologies, such as computer labs for IT training or medical equipment for healthcare courses, can make the training more effective and relevant. Government support and PPPs can play a pivotal role in modernizing facilities, as seen in some pilot projects in Assam that have improved technical training environments with private sector investment (Chatterjee, 2018; P. K. Gogoi & Khanikor, 2016; Konwar & Chakraborty, 2013; Ullah, 2015).

c) **Expanding Enrolment through Awareness Programs**: Addressing the stigma associated with vocational education requires awareness campaigns that highlight the advantages of skill-based learning. Initiatives to educate families and students about the career potential of vocational training, including its role in self-employment and entrepreneurship, can boost enrolment and reduce social biases. Awareness programs could include success stories of VET graduates or workshops in schools that emphasize the value of practical skills over traditional degree paths (Naraginti & Kichu, 2022).

d) **Supporting Women in Vocational Training**: Vocational education offers substantial opportunities for empowering women, especially in regions with limited female

workforce participation. Creating gender-inclusive vocational programs, with scholarships and mentorship for female students, can enhance women's participation in fields such as healthcare, education, and IT. Additionally, offering flexible class schedules and safe transport options can help overcome logistical barriers faced by female students (Gupta et al., 2023; Naraginti & Kichu, 2022).

Vocational education and skill development are vital for addressing employment gaps and enhancing students' job readiness in Assam and Northeast India. By fostering industry partnerships, upgrading training facilities, and promoting vocational education through awareness campaigns, Assam can cultivate a skilled workforce that meets local economic needs. Emphasizing VET not only enhances employability but also supports regional development by creating a self-reliant, skilled workforce. For the socio-economic growth of Northeast India, it is essential to recognize vocational education as an equal partner to traditional academic learning, capable of transforming the future of students and the region.

4. Discussion

The quality of undergraduate education in Assam and Northeast India is shaped by a complex interplay of infrastructural, socio-cultural, and economic factors. Through an analysis of the literature, key areas have emerged as crucial for addressing the region's educational challenges, including infrastructure gaps, gender disparities, digital limitations, and the need for vocational training. Together, these factors create significant barriers that limit educational access and quality for students across Assam and the Northeastern states.

This discussion synthesizes findings from previous sections and suggests an integrated approach that addresses both the structural and immediate needs of the educational landscape in Northeast India. In particular, the role of public-Private Partnerships (PPP), gender inclusion policies, digital initiatives, and vocational training programs stand out as fundamental strategies for a holistic educational reform.

Integrating Infrastructure and Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):

Educational infrastructure in Assam and Northeast India requires substantial improvement to provide an effective learning environment. As discussed, many institutions face infrastructural deficits that hinder the academic and practical learning experiences of students. Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) offer a viable solution for filling these gaps by bringing together the resources and expertise of the private sector with the public mandate for equitable education. Successful PPP models in Tripura, which have developed technical training centres in collaboration with industry, showcase the positive impact such partnerships can have on regional education(Ullah, 2015). In Assam, PPPs can support the construction and modernization of libraries, laboratories, and classrooms, creating a more conducive learning environment.

However, for PPPs to be effective, it is essential that state governments establish a regulatory framework that simplifies bureaucratic procedures and offers incentives for private investors. Providing tax benefits, reducing procedural delays, and maintaining transparency can build private sector confidence in the education sector. With a structured approach, PPPs can effectively contribute to upgrading infrastructure, providing technical resources, and enhancing the overall quality of education in Assam and the Northeast.

Addressing Gender Disparities through Inclusivity Initiatives:

Gender disparities in technical and vocational education require targeted efforts to create an equitable educational environment. Socio-cultural biases, lack of female mentors, and inadequate support facilities deter female students from pursuing technical fields, limiting their representation and contribution to the

workforce. Addressing these barriers is essential for empowering women and ensuring that educational resources reach all students regardless of gender.

Gender-inclusive policies, such as scholarships and mentorship programs for women, have shown promise in increasing female enrolment in technical education(Dey & Srivastava, 2022). Additionally, the development of infrastructure such as separate restrooms, female hostels, and safe transportation can enhance accessibility for female students, particularly in rural areas(Gupta et al., 2023). Encouragingly, mentorship programs that connect female students with industry professionals can serve as models for future initiatives, enabling young women to envision careers in fields traditionally dominated by men. The adoption of gender-inclusive policies not only supports individual empowerment but also enriches the workforce, contributing to the region's socio- economic growth.

Mitigating the Digital Divide:

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide in Assam and Northeast India, demonstrating the importance of digital infrastructure for modern education. Poor internet connectivity, limited access to devices, and low digital literacy prevented many students from effectively participating in online learning during the pandemic. Addressing these challenges is crucial to creating a resilient educational ecosystem that can support both in-person and digital learning.

Expanding digital infrastructure through government-led projects like Bharat Net is a fundamental step toward bridging the digital divide (Bharthur, 2015; Chouhan, 2024; Shah, 2024). Such initiatives, if implemented effectively, can ensure that even remote areas have access to high-speed internet. Additionally, providing students from low-income families with subsidized devices, as seen in some state-led initiatives, can improve digital access. Digital literacy programs targeting both students and teachers can enhance the efficacy of online learning, empowering students to navigate digital tools confidently. Training teachers in digital pedagogy, with a focus on integrating online resources into lesson plans, can further improve the quality of digital education (Borah & Bhattacharjee, 2023; Rahman, 2021).

By reducing the digital divide, Assam and the Northeastern states can create a more inclusive education system that adapts to future technological shifts, ultimately benefiting students regardless of their socio-economic background.

Promoting Vocational Training to Address Employment Gaps:

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is critical for addressing the employment challenges faced by UG students in Assam and Northeast India. Traditional degree programs often lack industry relevance, leaving students without the practical skills necessary to succeed in the job market. VET programs, however, provide hands-on experience and can align educational outcomes with local industry needs, making students job-ready upon graduation (Naraginti & Kichu, 2022; Prakasam, 2023).

Establishing partnerships between educational institutions and local industries is key to enhancing VET programs. These collaborations can facilitate internships, apprenticeships, and practical training sessions, allowing students to gain exposure to the working environment and develop industry-specific skills(Jones, 2013). For example, vocational training in agriculture, hospitality, healthcare, and information technology is well-suited to the economic profile of Northeast India, where these sectors offer significant employment potential. By strengthening industry linkages, VET programs can reduce the skills mismatch and support economic self-sufficiency within the region.

Synergies with NEP 2020 for Comprehensive Reform:

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for transforming education across India, and its region-specific focus on cultural inclusivity and flexible learning pathways aligns well with the needs of Northeast India. NEP's emphasis on incorporating local languages and heritage into the curriculum can foster a sense of cultural identity among students and reduce dropout rates, as students feel more connected to their learning materials (Department of History, 2024-25; Jamoh et al., 2024).

NEP's interdisciplinary learning model also complements vocational training, encouraging UG students to pursue a blend of academic and vocational subjects. This flexibility allows students to acquire theoretical knowledge alongside practical skills, broadening their career prospects. For NEP to be effective in Assam and Northeast India, however, targeted efforts are needed to overcome challenges in implementation, such as a lack of resources and limited awareness among educators. Investing in teacher training programs focused on NEP-compliant pedagogies, along with efforts to localize curriculum content, can enable smoother policy adoption in the region.

Toward an Integrated Approach: Policy and Practice:

The effective transformation of education in Assam and Northeast India requires an integrated approach that incorporates the above elements into a cohesive strategy. By aligning infrastructural improvements with digital expansion, gender inclusivity, vocational training, and NEP 2020 guidelines, educational stakeholders can create a system that caters to the unique needs of the region. This approach calls for:

1. **Cross-Sector Collaboration**: Establishing partnerships across government, private sector, and community organizations to combine resources and expertise for maximum impact.

2. **Targeted Investment**: Prioritizing funding for infrastructure, digital access, and training programs that directly address the educational disparities faced by students in Northeast India.

3. **Policy Support and Awareness**: Enhancing awareness and support for educational reforms among educators, parents, and community leaders to ensure grassroots engagement and lasting impact.

Effective education for UG students in Assam and Northeast India requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both systemic challenges and immediate needs. A comprehensive approach to education reform in Assam and Northeast India is essential for fostering a resilient, inclusive, and relevant educational environment. Through coordinated investments in infrastructure, digital education, vocational training, and gender inclusivity, along with the alignment of NEP 2020 goals, the region can overcome historical barriers and create pathways for student success improving educational quality and accessibility. A cohesive and region-specific strategy is essential to empower students in Assam and the Northeast, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic growth of the region. This integrated strategy not only addresses immediate educational challenges but also supports the broader socio-economic development of Northeast India, empowering students to contribute meaningfully to the region's future.

Recommendations

To improve undergraduate education in Assam and Northeast India, a multifaceted approach is required. Based on the analysis of infrastructural, socio-economic, and digital challenges, as well as the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 framework, the following recommendations provide actionable steps for creating a more equitable, resilient, and skill-oriented educational system in the region.

a) Prioritize Infrastructure Development through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

- **Action:** Expand PPP initiatives to enhance educational infrastructure, focusing on building

libraries, laboratories, technical training centres, and digital facilities.

- **Rationale:** PPPs can bring much-needed resources, expertise, and technology to educational institutions. Successful models in other states demonstrate that such partnerships can modernize facilities and make higher education more accessible in rural areas.

- **Implementation:** The state governments of Assam and Northeast India should simplify regulatory processes and provide tax incentives to attract private investors. By creating a favourable environment for PPPs, institutions can receive the infrastructural support necessary for effective education delivery.

b) Implement Gender-Inclusive Policies in Technical and Vocational Education

- **Action:** Establish scholarships, mentorship programs, and safe infrastructure (such as women's hostels and separate restrooms) to encourage female participation in technical and vocational fields.

- **Rationale:** Addressing gender disparities is essential for both educational equality and workforce development. Inclusive policies not only encourage women to pursue technical education but also contribute to a more diverse and adaptable workforce.

- **Implementation:** Institutions should collaborate with industry partners to create mentorship networks and conduct awareness programs targeting female students. These efforts should focus on the career potential of technical fields and offer supportive environments for women.

c) Bridge the Digital Divide by Expanding Connectivity and Access to Devices

- **Action:** Invest in digital infrastructure to improve internet connectivity in rural and underserved areas and establish subsidy programs for digital devices for students from low-income families.

- **Rationale:** The shift toward digital learning requires reliable internet access and affordable devices, yet these remain limited in Northeast India. Expanding digital infrastructure can make online and blended learning accessible to all students, reducing the impact of the digital divide.

- **Implementation:** Utilize government programs such as Bharat Net to extend high-speed internet to rural areas. Provide subsidized devices (tablets or laptops) for low-income students, and establish shared device facilities within institutions to promote equitable access to digital learning.

d) Strengthen Vocational Education through Industry Partnerships

- **Action:** Foster partnerships between educational institutions and local industries to align vocational training with local job market needs.

- **Rationale:** Vocational education can enhance employability by equipping students with skills relevant to local economic demands. Industry partnerships ensure that training aligns with current workforce requirements, creating pathways for student employment upon graduation.

- **Implementation:** Establish local industry boards to collaborate with institutions in developing curricula that reflect the skills needed in sectors like agriculture, healthcare, IT, and tourism. Additionally, industry-sponsored internships and apprenticeships should be integrated into vocational programs to provide practical, hands-on experience.

e) Enhance Teacher Training and Support NEP 2020 Implementation

- **Action:** Provide targeted professional development programs for educators, equipping them with skills for NEP-compliant pedagogy, digital instruction, and region-specific curricula.

- **Rationale:** Effective policy implementation relies on prepared educators. Professional development ensures that teachers can deliver

updated curricula, use digital tools effectively, and engage students in NEP's flexible and culturally inclusive learning model.

- **Implementation:** Conduct teacher training workshops on interdisciplinary and digital teaching methods. Educators should also receive training on incorporating local language and culture into their instruction, as envisioned by NEP 2020, to create a more inclusive and relevant curriculum.

Implementing these recommendations requires commitment from multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, educational institutions, industry partners, and the community. By focusing on infrastructure development, gender inclusion, digital access, vocational partnerships, and teacher training, Assam and Northeast India can create a sustainable and empowering education system. This strategy not only addresses the unique challenges of the region but also positions education as a driver of socio-economic development, preparing students for both local employment opportunities and a broader global economy.

Conclusion

The quality of undergraduate education in Assam and Northeast India is central to the region's socio-economic development, yet it is hindered by unique challenges, including infrastructural deficiencies, socio-economic barriers, gender disparities, and limited digital access. This review has highlighted that overcoming these obstacles requires a multifaceted approach that combines public-private partnerships (PPPs), digital literacy initiatives, vocational training, and gender-inclusive policies. Educational infrastructure in the region remains inadequate, affecting both the accessibility and quality of learning. By leveraging PPPs, institutions can enhance their facilities and resources, creating environments that support effective education. Similarly, addressing gender disparities in technical and vocational fields can empower women, broaden their career opportunities and contribute to a diverse workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the digital divide in Assam and Northeast India, underscoring the need for improved internet connectivity, affordable devices, and digital literacy programs. Bridging this gap is essential for creating an inclusive and resilient educational system capable of adapting to digital advancements. Additionally, vocational education aligned with local industry needs can help mitigate employment challenges by providing students with practical skills relevant to the regional economy. With the support of NEP 2020, which promotes cultural inclusivity and flexible learning pathways, Assam and the Northeastern states can implement educational reforms that reflect the unique needs of the region.

In conclusion, a cohesive, region-specific strategy that integrates infrastructure development, digital accessibility, gender inclusivity, vocational training, and NEP 2020 implementation is vital for advancing education in Assam and Northeast India. Such a strategy can transform the educational landscape, empower students and support the broader socio-economic growth of the region.

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