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SCHOOL DROPOUT AMONG RURAL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF CHIRANG DISTRICT, BIJNI SUBDIVISION, BODOLAND TERRITORIAL COUNCIL (BTC), ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

School dropout continues to be one of the most persistent challenges confronting educational development in rural and tribal regions of India. Although substantial progress has been made in expanding school access and enrolment through national education programmes, a significant proportion of children fail to complete their schooling, particularly beyond the elementary stage. This issue is especially pronounced in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) areas of Assam, where historical marginalisation, socioeconomic deprivation, linguistic diversity, and fragile livelihoods intersect to constrain educational participation.

This review paper examines the phenomenon of school dropout in Chirang District, with a specific focus on Bijni subdivision, a predominantly rural administrative unit within the BTC region. Drawing upon secondary literature, government reports, census data, and empirical studies from Assam and Northeast India, the paper analyses the multidimensional determinants of school dropout. These determinants include household poverty, parental education, child labour, seasonal migration, gender norms, and health and nutrition challenges, as well as school-related factors such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, long distances to secondary schools, language barriers, weak learning outcomes, and poor school climate. The paper also highlights the role of environmental vulnerability, particularly flooding and poor road connectivity, in disrupting schooling continuity.

In addition, the study critically reviews the implementation and effectiveness of major education policies and programmes in BTC areas, including the Right to Education Act, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, scholarship initiatives, and residential schooling provisions. While these interventions have contributed to improved enrolment and attendance at the primary level, their impact on long-term retention and secondary school completion remains limited. The paper argues that reducing school dropout in Chirang District requires context-sensitive, district-level strategies that address both educational and livelihood constraints. It concludes by emphasising the need for flexible schooling models, strengthened secondary education access, multilingual pedagogy, disaster-resilient infrastructure, and improved local governance to ensure sustained educational participation in rural BTC regions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as a foundational driver of social mobility, economic growth, and human development. In India, successive governments have prioritised the expansion of formal schooling

through large-scale initiatives aimed at universalising elementary education. As a result, enrolment rates at the primary level have improved considerably over the past two decades. However, the persistence of school dropout, particularly in rural, tribal, and economically marginalised

regions, continues to undermine the goal of equitable educational development.

School dropout refers to the premature discontinuation of formal education before the completion of a particular stage of schooling. While enrolment statistics often suggest progress, dropout rates reveal a more complex reality, especially in regions where structural disadvantages limit students' ability to remain in school. In rural areas, schooling frequently competes with livelihood demands, domestic responsibilities, and environmental uncertainties, making sustained participation difficult for many children.

The Northeast region of India presents a distinctive context for understanding rural school dropout. Characterised by difficult terrain, dispersed settlements, ethnic diversity, and limited infrastructure, the region faces challenges that differ substantially from those in more developed parts of the country. Within the Northeast, the districts governed by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in Assam occupy a particularly marginal position in terms of educational outcomes. These districts are home to large proportions of Scheduled Tribe and minority populations, many of whom depend on subsistence agriculture and informal labour.

Chirang District, located in western Assam, offers a compelling case study of rural school dropout within the BTC region. Established in 2004 following its separation from Bongaigaon district, Chirang remains predominantly rural, with limited industrial development and high levels of poverty. Bijni subdivision, one of the main administrative units of the district, encompasses a large number of villages characterised by agrarian livelihoods, low female literacy, and limited access to secondary education. Although government schools are present in most villages at the primary level, dropout rates increase sharply as students progress to higher grades.

This paper seeks to examine the underlying causes and patterns of school dropout in Chirang District, with particular attention to Bijni subdivision. By synthesising existing literature and secondary data, the study aims to identify the key socioeconomic, institutional, and environmental factors contributing

to dropout, assess the effectiveness of existing policy interventions, and highlight the need for district-level, context-specific strategies to improve school retention in rural BTC areas.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL DROPOUT

School dropout is often measured through administrative indicators that track enrolment and retention across grade levels. However, such measures provide only a partial understanding of the processes that lead children to leave school. In rural and tribal contexts, dropout is rarely a sudden or isolated event. Instead, it is typically the culmination of a gradual process of disengagement, marked by irregular attendance, poor academic performance, grade repetition, and declining motivation.

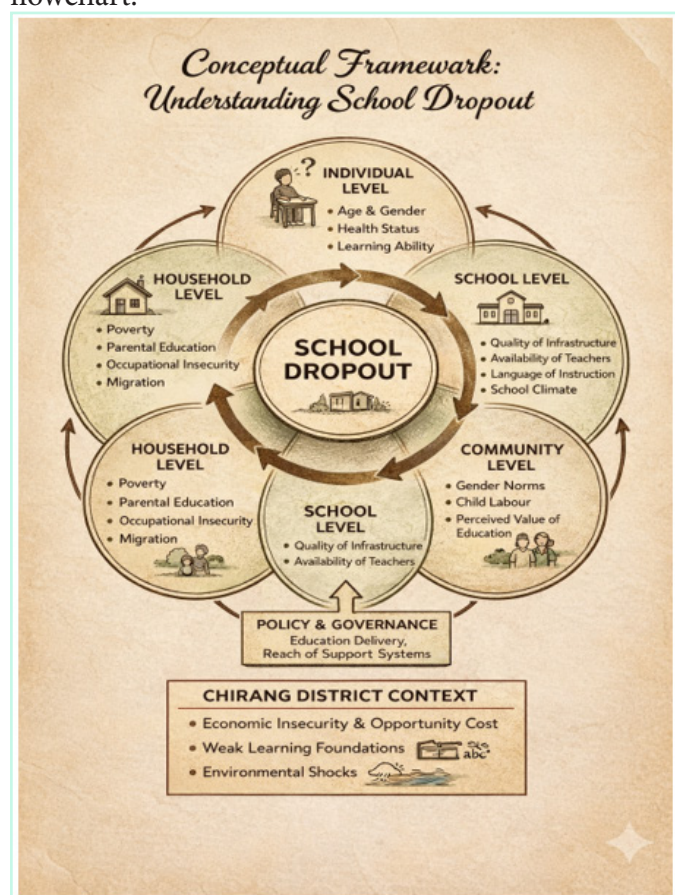
A multi-level or ecological framework is particularly useful for analysing school dropout in rural BTC districts. At the individual level, factors such as age, gender, health, and learning ability influence students' engagement with schooling. At the household level, poverty, parental education, occupational insecurity, and migration shape educational decisions and priorities. School-level factors, including infrastructure quality, teacher availability, language of instruction, and school climate, further mediate students' experiences. Community norms related to gender roles, child labour, and education interact with these factors, while broader policy and governance structures condition the effectiveness of education delivery.

In Chirang District, these layers of influence intersect in ways that intensify educational vulnerability. Economic insecurity increases the opportunity cost of schooling, particularly as children grow older and become capable of contributing to household income. Weak learning foundations, often rooted in language barriers and inadequate early-grade instruction, undermine academic confidence and increase the likelihood of grade repetition. Environmental shocks such as flooding disrupt both schooling and livelihoods, reinforcing cycles of absenteeism and dropout.

Understanding dropout in this context therefore requires moving beyond individual explanations

to examine the structural conditions that constrain educational participation. Such an approach highlights the need for integrated interventions that address not only school-related factors but also the broader socioeconomic and environmental challenges faced by rural households. Understanding dropout in this context therefore requires moving beyond individual explanations to examine the structural conditions that constrain educational participation. Such an approach highlights the need for integrated interventions that address not only school-related factors but also the broader socioeconomic and environmental challenges faced by rural households. Without addressing livelihood insecurity, language disadvantages, and local governance gaps, efforts to improve retention are likely to remain fragmented and uneven. Dropout, in this sense, reflects not a failure of the child, but the limits of the surrounding support systems. A conceptual framework rooted in local realities is therefore essential for meaningful analysis and policy response.

For more better understanding there is a simple flowchart:



3. SCHOOL DROPOUT IN NORTHEAST INDIA

3.1 Regional Patterns and Challenges

The Northeast region has historically lagged behind national averages in terms of educational attainment, particularly at the secondary level. Although literacy rates in some Northeastern states compare favourably with the national average, rural and interior districts continue to experience high dropout rates. These disparities reflect longstanding infrastructural deficits, geographic isolation, and limited economic opportunities.

Spatial analyses of dropout patterns reveal that school discontinuation is concentrated in districts characterised by poor road connectivity, limited secondary school coverage, and high levels of poverty. In such areas, children often have to travel long distances to attend upper-primary or secondary schools, increasing both direct and indirect costs of education. These challenges are compounded during the monsoon season, when flooding and landslides disrupt transportation and damage school infrastructure.

3.2 Tribal Communities and Language of Instruction

Language plays a critical role in shaping educational experiences in the Northeast. Many tribal children enter school speaking languages that differ from the medium of instruction used in classrooms. In Assam, Assamese and English are commonly used in government schools, even in areas where local languages dominate everyday communication. This mismatch creates significant barriers to comprehension, particularly in the early grades.

Research indicates that children who struggle to understand the language of instruction are more likely to fall behind academically, repeat grades, and eventually drop out. In contrast, mother-tongue-based and multilingual education approaches have been associated with improved learning outcomes and retention, especially in linguistically diverse and resource-constrained settings. However, the implementation of such approaches remains limited in many BTC schools due to shortages of trained teachers and appropriate learning materials.

3.3 Seasonal Migration and Livelihoods

Seasonal migration is a common livelihood strategy among rural households in the Northeast. Families migrate temporarily in search of agricultural or wage labour, often taking their children with them. This mobility disrupts schooling continuity and creates administrative barriers to re-enrolment. Even when children remain in their villages, they may be required to contribute to agricultural work during peak seasons, leading to prolonged absenteeism.

4. EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN THE BTC REGION

4.1 Institutional Structure

The Bodoland Territorial Council was established under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to provide a degree of autonomy to the Bodo-dominated areas of Assam. Education is one of the sectors under BTC administration, allowing the council to manage schools, appoint teachers, and oversee programme implementation. In theory, this decentralised structure enables greater responsiveness to local needs and cultural contexts.

In practice, however, education governance in BTC areas faces several challenges. Limited administrative capacity, weak monitoring systems, and coordination gaps between BTC authorities and the Assam state government have constrained effective implementation. Rural and remote areas, such as many parts of Chirang District, are particularly affected by these governance limitations.

4.2 Access and Quality Issues

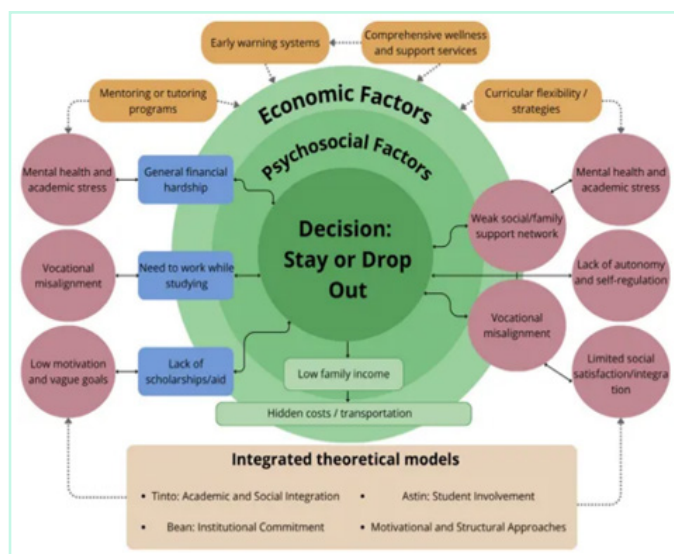
While primary schools are relatively widespread across BTC districts, access to upper-primary and secondary education remains uneven. Many villages lack nearby secondary schools, forcing students to travel long distances or relocate. Infrastructure deficits, including inadequate classrooms, sanitation facilities, and electricity, further undermine school quality.

Teacher shortages are a persistent problem, particularly in subject-specific areas at the secondary level. Multigrade teaching and high pupil-teacher ratios reduce instructional effectiveness and limit opportunities for individualised support. These quality issues contribute to poor learning outcomes,

which in turn increase the likelihood of dropout.

4.3 Gender and Social Disparities

Dropout rates in BTC districts vary significantly by gender and social group. Scheduled Tribe students face higher dropout risks due to greater exposure to poverty, migration, and language barriers. Gendered patterns are also evident. Boys are more likely to drop out to engage in wage labour, while girls face additional constraints related to safety, domestic responsibilities, and early marriage, particularly at the secondary level.



5. SOCIOECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF DROPOUT IN CHIRANG DISTRICT

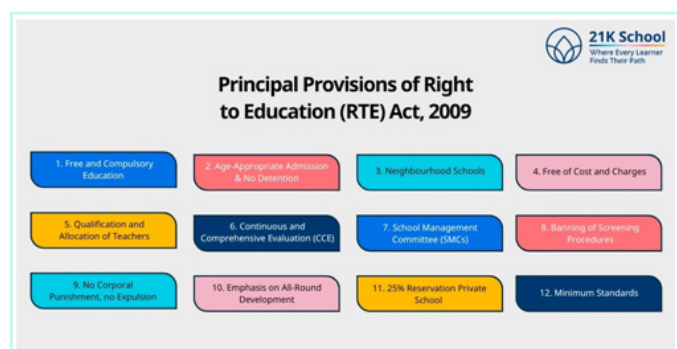
Poverty is a central determinant of school dropout in Chirang District. Most households depend on subsistence agriculture, daily wage labour, or informal employment, resulting in unstable incomes. During periods of economic stress, education is often deprioritised in favour of immediate survival needs. Children may be withdrawn from school to contribute to household labour or income generation.

Parental education strongly influences children's schooling outcomes. Parents with little or no formal education may have limited awareness of the long-term benefits of education or face difficulties supporting their children's learning. Occupational insecurity further reduces parents' capacity to monitor attendance and engage with schools.

Child labour, both paid and unpaid, remains common in rural Chirang. Children assist with

agricultural work, livestock rearing, and household chores, particularly during peak seasons. Over time, irregular attendance weakens academic performance and attachment to school, increasing the likelihood of dropout. Seasonal migration exacerbates these challenges by disrupting schooling continuity and social ties.

Gender norms also play a significant role. Girls often shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities and may face restrictions on mobility. Early marriage remains a concern in some communities, further limiting girls' educational opportunities. For boys, the expectation to contribute economically can lead to early entry into the labour market and premature school exit.



6. SCHOOL-LEVEL FACTORS IN BIJNI SUBDIVISION

School availability and quality significantly influence dropout patterns in Bijni subdivision. While most villages have access to primary schools, upper-primary and secondary schools are fewer and unevenly distributed. Long travel distances increase absenteeism and discourage continuation, particularly for girls.

Infrastructure conditions in many schools are inadequate. Poor classroom facilities, lack of sanitation, and limited access to drinking water reduce student comfort and engagement. Teacher absenteeism and shortages further undermine instructional quality. In multilingual settings, teachers may lack proficiency in students' home languages, complicating communication and learning.

Weak learning outcomes are both a cause and consequence of dropout. Students who fail to acquire foundational skills in early grades struggle to keep

up academically, leading to grade repetition and frustration. Over time, disengagement becomes entrenched, making dropout a rational response to repeated failure. School climate, including teacher-student relationships and disciplinary practices, also shapes students' sense of belonging and motivation.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Environmental vulnerability is a defining feature of Chirang District. Seasonal flooding disrupts transportation, damages school infrastructure, and displaces households. During and after floods, children are often required to assist with household recovery activities, reducing time for schooling. Prolonged disruptions increase the risk of permanent dropout.

Poor road connectivity further limits access to schools and complicates teacher deployment and supervision. Health and nutrition challenges, including undernourishment and illness, reduce attendance and learning capacity. Inadequate sanitation facilities disproportionately affect girls, particularly during adolescence.

8. POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT

The Right to Education Act has played a crucial role in expanding access to elementary education in Chirang District. However, implementation gaps remain, particularly at the upper-primary level. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme has improved attendance at the primary stage but has limited influence on secondary retention. Scholarship programmes provide financial support but are often undermined by delays and lack of awareness. Residential schools and hostels offer potential solutions to distance and safety barriers, though their coverage and quality vary.

9. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Addressing school dropout in Chirang District requires a shift from enrolment-focused strategies to retention-oriented approaches. Flexible academic calendars aligned with agricultural cycles, bridge courses for migrant children, and multilingual pedagogy can improve continuity. Expanding secondary school access, strengthening teacher

training, investing in disaster-resilient infrastructure, and improving district-level data systems are essential. Greater community engagement and intersectoral coordination are also needed to address the underlying socioeconomic drivers of dropout.

10. CONCLUSION

School dropout in Chirang District reflects the cumulative impact of poverty, weak education infrastructure, environmental vulnerability, and governance constraints. Addressing this challenge requires integrated, context-sensitive interventions that recognise the realities of rural livelihoods and cultural diversity. District-level analysis, as demonstrated in this paper, is critical for designing effective strategies to improve educational retention and equity in rural BTC regions and across Northeast India.

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