

Bridging the Gaps: Public Education Financing and Quality in Assam's Tea Garden Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The tea garden communities of Assam constitute a vital yet historically marginalized segment of the state's population, significantly contributing to its economy through their labor force participation in the tea industry. Despite this, schools in tea garden areas face persistent challenges, particularly in terms of poor infrastructure, insufficient teacher availability, and non-compliance with Right to Education (RTE) norms. While Assam's overall public expenditure on education has risen in absolute terms, its share within the total state budget has sharply declined from 19% in 2015–16 to just 11% in 2019–20, indicating a worrying shift in policy prioritization away from education.

A joint study conducted by the Government of Assam and the Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights examined both education financing and the quality of educational services in tea garden and non-tea garden schools. The study revealed critical disparities in key areas such as teacher qualifications, pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) compliance, infrastructure maintenance, and student entitlements like mid-day meals and textbooks. These findings highlight systemic neglect, particularly in tea garden management schools, which often operate without adequate government funding or oversight.

Recent government efforts to provincialize more than 400 tea garden schools provide a crucial opportunity to correct these inequities. However, this transition must be accompanied by comprehensive policy action. Key recommendations include increasing the education budget to meet RTE obligations, enhancing teacher training with a focus on local language use, improving infrastructure and its maintenance, leveraging Samagra Shiksha for institutional capacity building, and empowering School Management Committees (SMCs) to adopt proactive, community-based solutions.

2 | INTRODUCTION AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM



INTRODUCTION

This policy brief underscores the urgent need for equitable public education provisioning in Assam, particularly in schools located within tea garden regions. Representing nearly 20% of the state's population, tea garden communities have historically contributed significantly to Assam's economy and political landscape, yet remain chronically underserved in terms of educational access and quality. Despite their critical role, schools in these areas face systemic challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified teachers, and inconsistent delivery of student entitlements (Sarma, 2011).

With the Assam government now initiating the provincialization of over 400 tea garden management schools and implementing structural reforms in educational administration, the time is ripe for evidence-based policy responses. This brief draws from a collaborative study conducted by the Government of Assam and the Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, which examined public expenditure patterns and compared the quality of education in tea garden and non-tea garden schools across five key districts (Government of Assam, 2021). The findings point to deep-rooted disparities in budget allocation, school infrastructure, teacher availability, and resource management. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that educational reforms truly reach and benefit the most marginalized. This brief offers recommendations for strategic action to close these gaps.

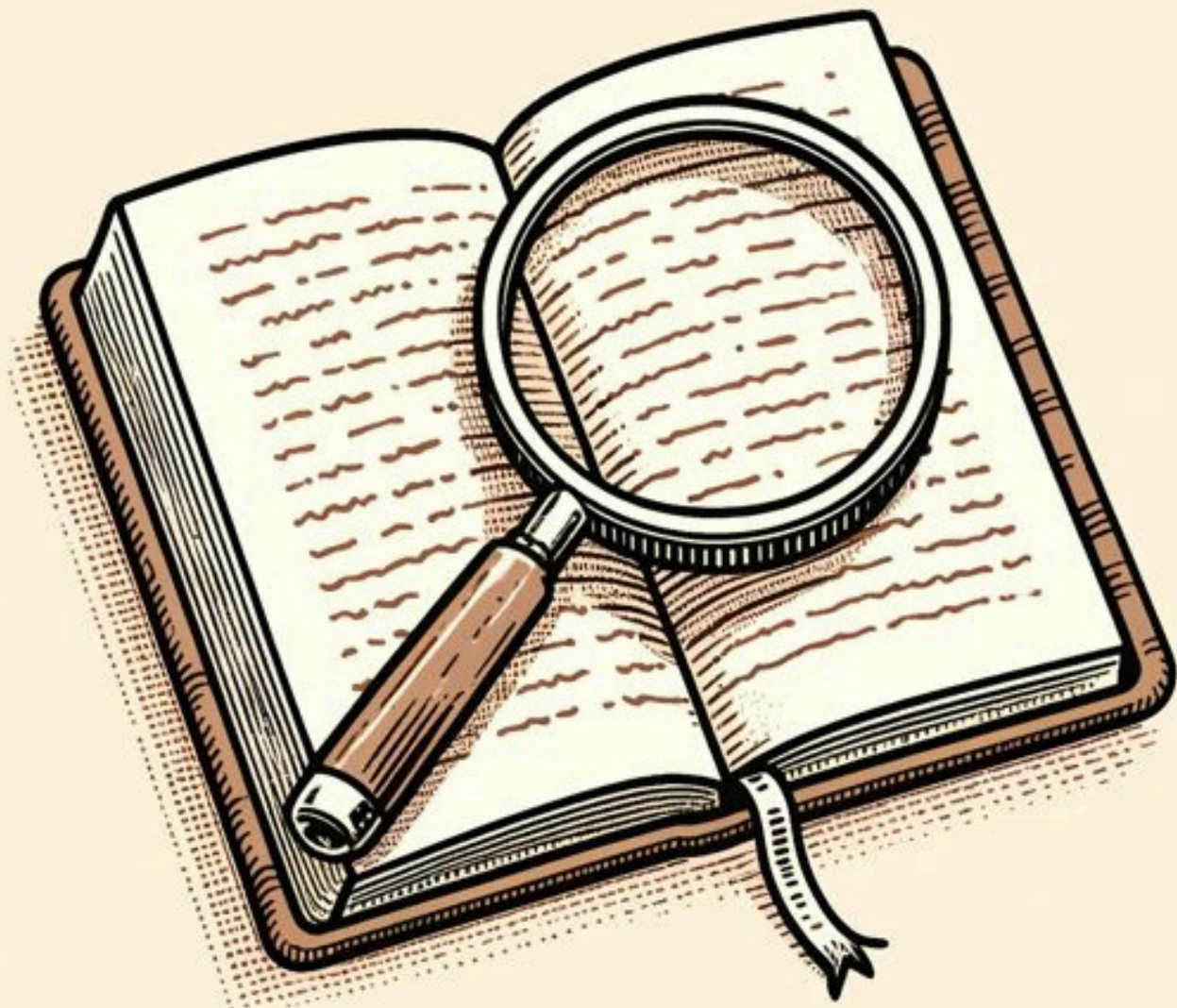
Context and Importance of the Problem

Tea garden communities in Assam are critical to the state's tea economy and electoral map, yet face systemic marginalization in education access and quality. Despite employing around 10 lakh workers across 856 gardens, educational provisions for their children remain inadequate. Tea garden workers and their families, categorized officially as "tea tribes," experience barriers in accessing quality public education due to poor infrastructure, underqualified teachers, and minimal resource allocation (Standard, 2021).

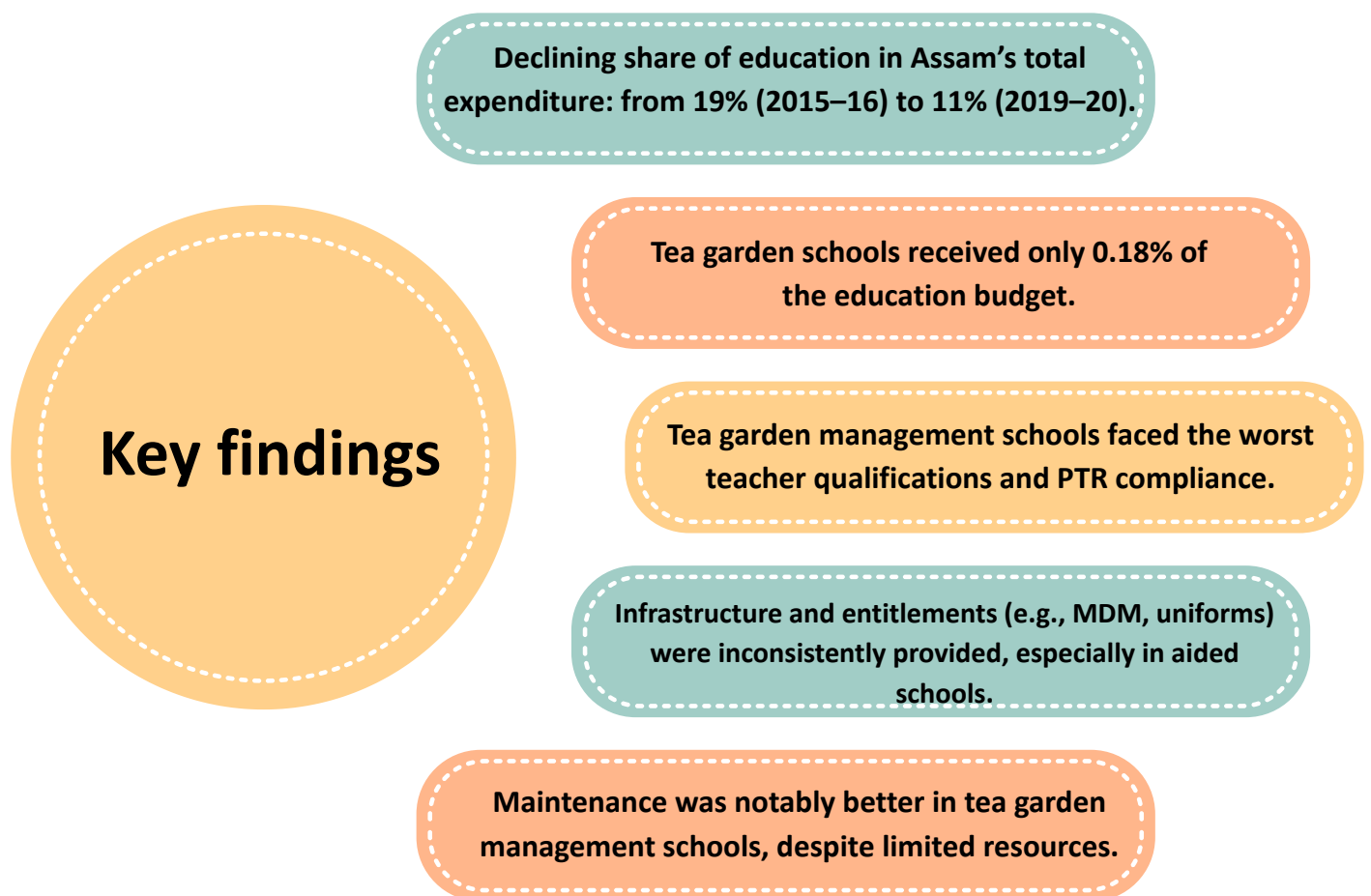
The study surveyed 46 schools across five districts (Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, and Tinsukia), comparing government, aided, and tea garden management schools in both tea and non-tea garden areas. The findings show significant disparities in teacher availability, PTR compliance, and infrastructure quality, especially in tea garden management schools that do not receive standard government grants (Government of Assam, 2021).

Moreover, the study found that only 0.18% of the state's education budget was earmarked specifically for tea garden schools, despite overall growth in expenditure. A concerning trend is the declining share of education within the total state budget. This context underlines the urgency to realign public financing, ensure equitable distribution of resources, and implement policy changes that recognize the needs of these marginalized learners.

3 | RESEARCH OVERVIEW

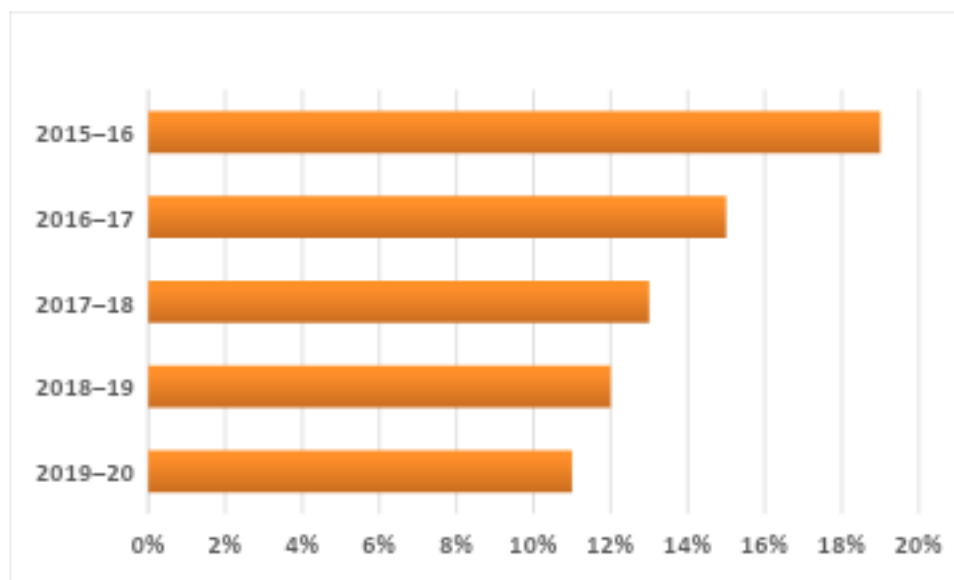


The brief assessed public expenditure on school education in Assam, with special focus on tea garden areas. It used a mixed-methods approach, including budget analysis (2015–16 to 2021–22) and primary data collection from 46 schools across five districts. Schools were categorized into government, aided, and tea garden management types in both tea and non-tea garden areas.



This research offers a granular understanding of funding flow and service delivery disparities. It is particularly relevant in light of Assam's move to provincialize tea garden schools and merge the directorates of elementary and secondary education. The findings call for reallocation of resources, improved management practices, and targeted teacher support strategies to bridge equity gaps in school education.

1. Declining share of education in Assam's total expenditure: from 19% (2015–16) to 11% (2019–20).



2. Over the period 2015–16 to 2021–22, expenditures exclusively earmarked for tea garden schools (scholarships and training) formed just 0.18% of the total school education budget, an almost negligible share. While the (Government of Assam, 2023) budget report does not provide a year-wise series for this line item, the overall decline in education's share in the state budget over the same period suggests that tea garden schools have not gained in relative priority.”

3. While schools in both tea-garden and non-tea-garden areas fall short of meeting RTE norms for teacher qualifications and pupil-teacher ratios, the extent of non-compliance is significantly higher in tea-garden schools. Within the tea-garden region itself, tea-garden–managed schools perform the worst, lagging behind both government and aided schools, which, in turn, are already weaker than their counterparts in non-tea-garden areas (Bosumatari & Goyari, 2015).

4. Access to basic infrastructure and student entitlements, such as mid-day meals, uniforms, textbooks, and functional sanitation, was uneven across schools, with aided schools experiencing the greatest inconsistency and disruption. Field observations and stakeholder interviews highlighted frequent delays in the delivery of uniforms and textbooks, irregular supply of MDM rations, and prolonged periods where toilets, drinking water facilities, or boundary walls remained unrepaired. In many aided schools, teachers reported using their own funds or community contributions to manage shortfalls, underscoring the structural inequities in provisioning compared to government schools (Ekka & Chaliha, 2024). The below example illustrates the scenario.

“In Assam’s tea-garden region, access to key entitlements such as mid-day meals and uniforms remains uneven. For example, while some schools have free uniforms and textbooks, quality and regularity of the mid-day meal provision is patchy with some tea-garden schools reporting meals being skipped. Moreover, only around one-fifth of tea-garden schools even have a permanent boundary wall. The newly established model schools inaugurated in 2022 in tea -garden areas were explicitly promised uniforms, textbooks and mid-day meals for every student (~₹1 lakh per school) in recognition of these persistent gaps.”

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4 | ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION



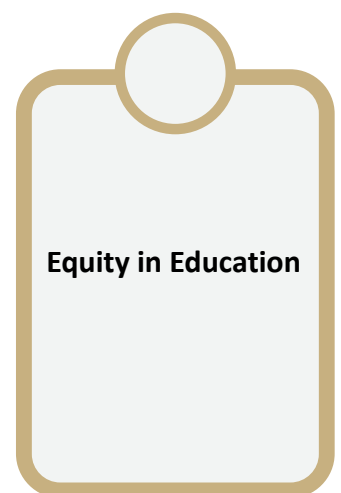
ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The findings suggest a mismatch between policy intent and actual educational provisioning in tea garden areas. While overall education spending has risen in nominal terms, Assam's declining budget share for education raises red flags about long-term prioritization. The disproportionate burden placed on aided and tea garden management schools, combined with limited oversight, has led to severe inequities.

Tea garden management schools operate with minimal government funding, receiving only textbooks and MDM support. These schools often perform better in infrastructure maintenance but fall short on teacher availability and qualifications. Government schools, although better funded, lack maintenance and local language use, limiting accessibility for first-generation learners. Aided schools are perhaps the most neglected in both infrastructure and entitlements, despite receiving similar grants.

The planned provincialization of over 400 tea garden schools presents a promising opportunity to integrate them into mainstream public education. However, this also increases the state's responsibility to comply with RTE norms and invest in recurring costs, such as teacher salaries and training. The analysis highlights the need for a nuanced approach, encompassing not only infrastructure but also pedagogy, governance, and community engagement.

Moreover, teacher training must include strategies for inclusive education, use of local dialects, and emergency preparedness (especially important given Assam's vulnerability to floods). Samagra Shiksha and Tea Board India schemes can be leveraged for targeted improvements, but require institutional will and operational clarity.



5 | POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Increase Education Budget Share

Assam's declining share of education in its total state expenditure from 19% in 2015–16 to just 11% in 2019–20, is a critical concern. Reversing this trend by increasing budget allocations to education can enable the state to meet the requirements of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, address teacher shortages, improve infrastructure, and strengthen entitlements such as mid-day meals, uniforms, and textbooks. Increased funding can also support training, digital infrastructure, and maintenance, particularly in underserved tea garden areas.

PROS

- Allows the state to fulfill RTE norms, particularly around pupil-teacher ratios, infrastructure standards, and teacher qualifications.
- Strengthens the quality and reach of public education, leading to long-term social equity and economic gains.
- Enables consistent, reliable funding for marginalized schools, reducing dependency on ad-hoc or fragmented support.

CONS

- Requires strong political commitment and may necessitate shifting funds from other key sectors like health or infrastructure.
- Budgetary expansion alone does not guarantee improved outcomes without effective planning and accountability mechanisms.

2. Provincialize Strategically with Transition Planning

Provincializing over 400 tea garden management schools is a landmark decision that can integrate these institutions into the formal education system. However, the process must be supported with careful transition planning to ensure continuity in learning, adequate staffing, and incorporation of school management into public governance systems.

PROS

- Promotes educational equity by bringing all school types under a common framework for funding, staffing, and standards.
- Ensures tea garden schools gain access to state resources, entitlements, and teacher recruitment, improving overall educational quality.
- Helps reduce institutional disparities and creates a unified education system.

CONS

- Requires substantial initial investment for salaries, infrastructure upgrades, and administrative absorption.
- If not properly planned, may lead to disruptions in service delivery, teacher deployment delays, or administrative bottlenecks.

3. Incentivize Infrastructure Development & Local Language Use

Investing in school infrastructure and promoting the use of local languages in classroom instruction are vital for improving engagement and learning among students from marginalized communities. Clean, functional facilities enhance attendance, while instruction in mother tongues builds confidence and comprehension.

PROS

- Improves student retention, especially in early grades, by making schools more accessible, relatable, and welcoming.
- Builds community trust in the public education system and fosters cultural inclusivity.
- Enhances learning outcomes by enabling better understanding and participation through mother tongue instruction.

CONS

- Requires localized planning and monitoring to ensure funds are used effectively and improvements are sustained over time.
- May face implementation challenges in multilingual settings, including the need for teacher training and localized curriculum development.

6 | CONCLUSIONS



CONCLUSION

Assam's tea garden communities have long suffered from educational neglect, with underfunded and poorly staffed schools limiting the opportunities of thousands of children. The analysis reveals a clear inequity in public education provisioning and budget allocation. The decline in education's share of the state budget, especially in a socially and economically vulnerable state, is a trend that must be urgently reversed.

To achieve equitable education in Assam, especially for tea garden students, the following steps are essential:

- Increase the budget share for education to accommodate teacher recruitment, infrastructure upgrades, and training aligned with RTE norms.
- Ensure full provincialization of tea garden schools is supported with transition financing, staffing, and administrative support.
- Invest in teacher training programs that emphasize inclusive pedagogy, use of local languages, and crisis-resilient education.
- Establish accountability mechanisms for school infrastructure maintenance and effective use of grants, including flexibility for local needs.
- Empower SMCs and school leadership through training and financial incentives to engage in problem-solving, not just compliance.

If these steps are not taken, the gap between tea garden and mainstream schools will continue to widen, undermining Assam's human capital potential and deepening cycles of marginalization.

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