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## Challenges Faced by Students in Higher Education Institutions in Northeast India

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16793901>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 22-07-2025

**Published:** 10-08-2025

#### Keywords:

*Higher education,  
Challenges, Northeast  
India, Socio-economic  
factors*

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper illustrates the various problems students face in the higher education structure of Northeast India, as a highly diverse and notoriously difficult context for socio-economics and political issues. Through a descriptive qualitative design, the present study analysed second-order data that was created from diverse sources, such as, official records, academic studies, and student testimonials. Some of the problems identified as issues in this present study, included poor facilities, lack of faculty, dated curriculum, language issues, financial issues, commercialisation of education, political instability and drug taking. This is all in light of empirically based enrolment data that shows, particularly in Mizoram and Nagaland, the need to have strength in facilities. This study identified socio-political issues that create barriers to access and quality in education. The conclusions show the need then for working collaboratively between the government departments, educational organisations, and communities to deal with the issues effectively as possible. Accordingly, the presenting of learning education opportunities, can empower students, as stakeholders, to potentially make a significant contribution to the socio-economic development of Northeast India.

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### Introduction:

The coronavirus pandemic has indeed paraded destructive aspects over the globe and India is not an exception. The virus which started spreading blackly all over the world in December 2019 has without a



trace picked up speed across the nation, making it one of the top ten nations with confirmed cases. Exceeding beyond that mark, the number of COVID-19 fatalities in India has surpassed that of China: a dark name, indeed, in this battle against the pandemic. Sudden spikes in numbers have resulted in record-breaking steps, with countries worldwide sealing borders and instituting hard lockdowns. In India, individuals are locked in indoors, with travel by both roads and air strictly severed. The lockdown has been so ongoing that it leads to a confused state of mind among people and communities, with more turmoil to continue for growing months. The whole worldwide scientific community is busy devising techniques to fold the coronavirus mystery into an effective vaccine. Such progress is claimed by researchers and scientists of different countries and institutions, but it is nowhere to be found in terms of an effective vaccine. Much of the facts regarding the virus-its nature, spread, and eventual consequence-remain unknown. The inquiry has not been left for the scientists; the common man by and large, more so in India, is searching for answers in one's own level. From cities to villages, human beings are trying to understand catastrophe semantics and the severity of fallout.

Asia suffers a double whammy of public health trauma when the pandemic strikes, it also triggers an economic dilemma with severe ramification. Public restrictions imposed by the Government of India and the Reserve Bank of India even today fail to cushion economic losses throughout the country, notwithstanding several monetary stimulus packages from the government. The stock market has been tumultuous, and major indices like the Sensex and Nifty have indicated declining behavior within the last few weeks. The macro economy seems to disintegrate speedily, indicating the strength of general disruption across the economy due to the pandemic. Shops have been closed, unemployment has catapulted, and trade connections have broken further into the deepening economic quandary. What once turned up in the cities has spread to the rural areas of India, creating cause for great concern. Almost two-thirds of India's population lives in rural areas. The country has thus become an extensive site for the effects of the virus in rural areas. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, which together account for a population of over 400 million, have a considerable rural presence. Initial reporting on COVID-19's impact on rural areas has not been as high disaster as their urban counterparts, but effects are stressing the situation into jeopardy. Insufficient infrastructure for healthcare, poor awareness, and dependence on urban markets for final sales have made rural areas more susceptible.

Unique challenges are now raised by the transition of the virus to rural areas of India. Unlike urban areas, health care facilities and services are generally more limited in rural areas during the occurrence of Pandemic. Economic spillovers of the pandemic-supply chain disruptions and lower demand for agricultural commodities hit rural livelihood hard. The migrant labourers returned to their villages during



the lockdown, but local economies are overloaded because of their underemployment or unemployment. All of them have pushed millions into a position of vulnerability in rural India. As the nation inches forward in this crisis, everyone's action together seems directed at making this pandemic the least affected. There are gigantic challenges here, with the road to recovery not clear. This pandemic exposes all weak links in the health component of India's stat-society and economy, pointing to an urgent need for concerted efforts to address the immediate and long-term consequences of this global health emergency.

### **Challenges Faced by Higher Education Institutions in Northeast India:**

Northeast Indian educational institutions are thus up against multiple challenges that hinder the progress and development of these institutions. Even with the consistent attempts made toward the betterment of education, various challenges still exist in concerning sociology, economy, infrastructure, and administration. Such infrastructural downgrades are mainly due to poor funding, leaving many institutions without the necessary resources to qualify for accreditation by the National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC). Those already accredited score low mainly due to poor infrastructure and poor student-teacher ratio, which clearly portrays the urgent need for infrastructure enhancement to allow an efficient teaching-learning experience. The educational scenario in the regions has low physical infrastructure that prohibits the provision of quality education. Most colleges and universities indeed lack even the basic facilities of modern classrooms, good laboratories, libraries fully functioning in tune with modern times, and access to online resources.

### **State-wise Number of Universities in Northeast India**

<b>Sr. No</b>	<b>State Name</b>	<b>Number of Universities</b>
1	Arunachal Pradesh	11
2	Assam	30
3	Manipur	11
4	Meghalaya	10
5	Mizoram	2
6	Nagaland	5
7	Tripura	7

**(Table 1) Source:** University Grants Commission, Annual Report 2023-24

As per the Ministry of Education, the principal issue facing students across the Northeast region is the propagation of quality Higher Education Institutions. Eight states of the region struggle under the weight of 76 universities-that means-university education remains distant to these students. Mizoram with only two universities and Nagaland with five universities suffer immense constraint pushing students, in either case, migration else mere dropping out. This really crushes the career aspirations, economy, and finishing. Shortage of faculties is again a big obstacle to this region for higher educational purposes. Financial constraints have left institutions with the only option of temporary faculty appointments. Addicted to casual workers only denies a fair share to job security that arises from uncertainty. Elsewhere, all these were experienced with unavailable institutions such as the IITs and the IIMs, driving the good students away in search of better opportunities for higher education from the regions-this causes an alarming brain drain. Exit of students to urban centers such as Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai will further weaken local educational institutions as they lost extremely talented individuals in order to enhance competitiveness in the Northeast India for educational institutions.

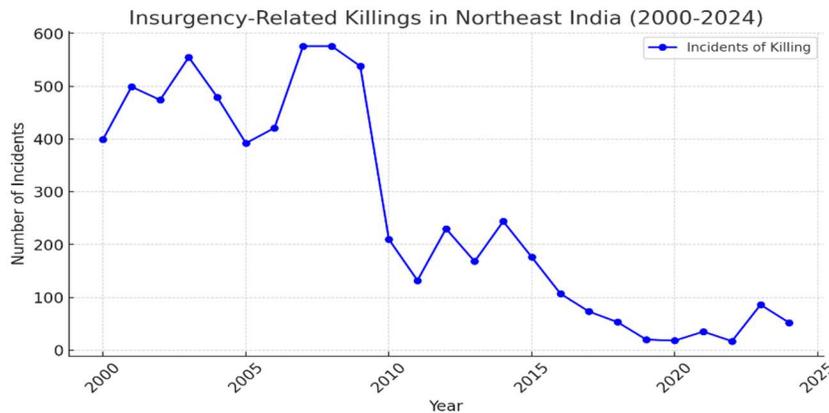
The Northeast India university systems are afflicted by antiquated curriculums that lay too much emphasis on theory while failing to impart practical relatability. Thus, upon graduation students lack employability qualifications in today's working environment. The lack of industry-academy partnerships to strengthen research work and the employability of the graduates adds insult to injury. The language barrier provides another serious causal factor due to a myriad of indigenous languages and dialects in the area. The irregular development of learning material in local languages is a hindrance to students not only by itself but also putting a dent in their experience. Higher education in the region is generally financially constrained from supporting libraries, laboratories, and student hostels. Financial mismanagement and corruption further exacerbate the situation, resulting in grossly uneven distribution of educational funds. This seems to be giving rise to commercialization, a trend in higher education that has become a great concern, where some private universities are largely driven by commercial considerations rather than their academic quality. Such trends have made things even worse because they directly impact access and the affordability of higher education, thereby leaving students with almost no choice of a quality education.

**Impact of Insurgency on Higher Education:**

While there are many such problems troubling militants attacked higher education areas, these problems are worse at more advanced stages of education. Due to political-social uproar, it has now become



difficult for every student, teacher, and even institutions to function. Most educational institutions are usually turned temporary military camps, making things even worse in their very objectives. For example, frequent shutdowns, strikes, and increased security create hurdles in the academic calendar in militancy areas, eventually resulting in long developments coming in the education process. This not only creates a hurdle for regular academic activities. The situation drastically leaves longer-term impacts over the education landscape in those places.



(Graph 1) Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal

The South Asia Terrorism Portal reveals that the trend of militancy-related killings in Northeast India between 2000 to 2024 has kept a prolonged law and order situation in the region. During these periods, more than 12,000 peoples have died in around 6,500 attacks. Death tolls were extraordinarily high before 2010, as can be seen in Graph 1, but they gradually fell to a mere 17 in 2022. However, attacks surge again in 2023 and 2024, reaching 86 and 52 respectively, which is a cause for concern, especially in states like Manipur. Continued instability provides a challenge to higher educational institutions in Northeast India in terms of campus risks, shortage of faculty, disruption of academic activities and undue constraints on research. The culture of rebellion forms the basis of student politics in higher education systems, and this directly impacts educational atmosphere in the campuses. For instance, many student organizations affiliated with militant organizations in the Northeast create ideological battles in their campuses. The shift from academics to political fights brings down the general education objective and then the quality and effectiveness of student learning. Education can also politicize students of divergent views against engaging in intellectual discussion, thereby creating a suffocating environment where critical thinking and innovation cannot thrive.

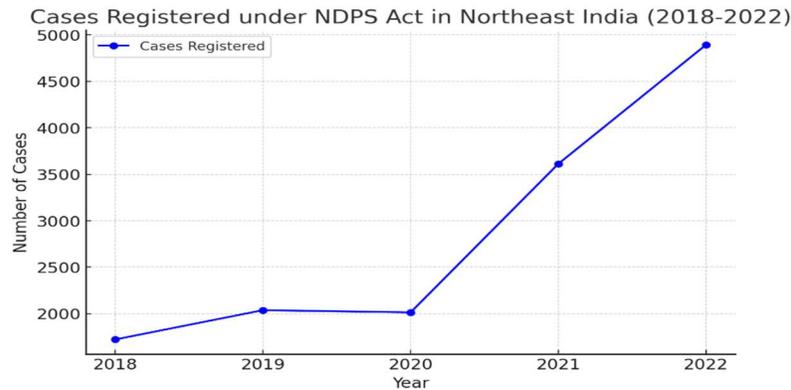
Such an environment of unrest and violence also leads to a serious brain drain of experienced learners and teachers. In the quest for better opportunities, students and teachers often move to more secure



environments. Brain drain negatively affects the quality of education because the institutions do not have enough skilled teachers, which leads to larger classrooms and less academic support for the students remaining. Inability to attract or retain qualified teachers has an adverse impact on the quality of the process of education as such and threatens the future of higher education in insurgency-affected areas. Furthermore, long drawn battles deter funding from government and private educational facilities, worsened by security concerns which turn off such investments. Schools are thus left with poorly equipped facilities such as libraries, laboratories, internet, and hostels. All these resources are essential in creating an enabling learning and academic environment. Ongoing under-investment further entrenches existing inequalities, thereby making it much more difficult for students to access quality higher education. Regional instability stemming from insurgency also adversely affects research efforts, which are extremely vital in academic developments and innovations. Scholars and teachers become unwilling to undertake such projects due to the uncertainties attached to such locations, hence total decline in academic research output. Restrictions on accessing available resources and collaborating with external partners for research scheme stifle innovative and academic progress. This resulting gap in access to advanced inquiry opportunities further curtails the creation of new knowledge and technologies necessary for society's progress.

### **Drug Abuse Among Students in Northeast India:**

Northeast India, with its rich fabric of religious, cultural and geographical diversities, is presently caught up in social problems, among them being substance abuse. Youths, especially students of this region, are being caught up in the vices of drug abuse at an alarming rate. An issue this great can in no manner ever be weighed within the contents of personal and professional development but must of necessity embrace the very homes and the larger society. Factors such as availability of drugs, peer pressure and financial constraints are compelling students to indulge in substance abuse to the detriment of their health and mental well-being. The geographical proximity of Northeast India to the Golden Triangle extending into Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, which are all major producers of opiates and narcotic drugs, is one of the biggest causes of drug abuse in the region. Consequently, drugs became readily available in Northeast India. Opium, heroin, and methamphetamines are sold openly, especially along college and university campuses. Struggling with academic pressure rather than existential despair, the students often turn to these substances for relief. It has been shown that drug abuse is on the rise in the region, especially among young men and women, and is therefore associated with declining school performance and rising mental health problems.



**(Graph 2) Source:** Website of Ministry of Home Affairs

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs and Graph 2, the rising number of cases under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act in Northeast India between the years 2018 and 2022 reflects a serious drug threat. The jump from 1,723 cases in 2018 to 4,891 in 2022 reflects more trafficking, consumption and law enforcement actions. This trend poses socio-economic and security issues for the region. Official data show a dramatic increase in registered cases of narcotics in Assam, which have gone up from 478 in 2018 to 2,902 in 2022. Unbelievably, many remain unreported. Illicit production occurs in the rural interiors of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, and narcotics are available cheap by the standards of Northeast India. Substance abuse is rising among students, and this very serious social issue calls for rigid enforcement and awareness campaigns. Illicit production of the narcotic crop is carried chiefly in rural hinterlands, where agriculture remains an important source of income. Most of the indigenous populace makes drug production for easy perks, showing a disturbing level of tolerance towards the drug trade. This pattern not only encourages youth in substance abuse but also has long-term social and economic sag on scientists' minds. The adverse effects on students are enhanced, as they have to face a lot of challenges on drug gains associated with health issues, abuses and downgrading their academic performance. Basically, substance abuse takes away the study schedule and makes it considerably hard to give out exams, leading a lot of students to give up their college education. Substance abuse constitutes a threat to the physical and mental well-being of students. Physically, it triggers matters like cardiovascular diseases, liver ailments, and growing vulnerabilities to sickness. Mentally, students may battle with depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns. Besides, drug use also profoundly hinders decision-making abilities, and damaged judgment can cause them to fall into risky situations like unsafe sex and violent acts.

The individual and social consequences of drug addiction are equally broad. It worsens family relationships through stress and conflict and increases the potential to disrupt families. From a social



perspective, the civil order gets increased crime and social decay. Drug addiction undermines drug-free social coherence in Northeast India. This will erode social networks and undermine the community spirit of unity and cooperation. It carries high stigma effects on the victim and the family. Such students would often then stand in danger of discrimination by society, and when discrimination occurs, stigmatisation gets intensified. Such stigmatisation stands as an impediment to access treatment and recovery chances, making the problem worse. The family feels a sense of shame for having a drug addict amongst them and thus is burdened with this shame emotionally. A concerted, three-dimensional approach is thus needed: community awareness programs, serious law enforcement, and setting up more rehabilitation centers. How the governments, schools, and civil society shall suggest a collaborative solution would be able to create an enabling environment for victims. By enhancing awareness and supporting subsidised rehabilitation, Northeast India can see the beginning of reducing the scale of the criminal activities that are robbing its youth and society.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations: Mechanisms to Empower Higher Education**

There are a number of challenges faced by higher education in Northeast India that inhibit the success and growth of students as well as institutions. One of the most serious problems that plague many institutions in this region is its dearth of infrastructure. Most of the colleges and universities lack state-of-the-art facilities such as well-equipped laboratories, libraries and computer services to full fill the conditions of best-quality education. Due to inadequate funding and administrative support, this lack of infrastructure contributes to the low accreditation scores that the institutions receive from their regulatory authorities, such as the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). At the same time, this situation is worsened with the inadequacy of competent teaching staff; most institutions rely on contract teachers because of budget restrictions, which also contributes to low quality of teaching. As most talented students scavenge for better prospects in urban areas, so does brain drain syndrome aggravate the issue, leaving local institutions bereft of potential contributors to their academic fields. The labour market value of the students is less, hence increasing socio-economic inequalities, because they are not prepared for the labour market due to a disconnection from relevance among the curriculum by excessive theoretical knowledge. For resolving these issues, it is essential that stakeholders-government entities, academic institutions and the community-come together for creating a conducive higher education ecosystem. Investment in educational infrastructure has to be increased to provide institutions with the necessary facilities to conduct effective teaching and learning. This may include setting up specialised technical colleges and vocational training schemes to meet the requirements of the local employment market. In addition, curriculum restructuring would be required to bridge the gap between theoretical



knowledge and practice. Collaborative efforts from industry to universities can provide students with opportunities of internships and project works, thereby making them suitable for employment. Intensive awareness and rehabilitation programmes are also necessary to mitigate student abuse of substances to enhance learning outcomes. Families and communities would be able to be part of a holistic environment for recovery through collaborative discussions and awareness avenues to remove stigma attached to addiction. With these multi-pronged schemes, Northeast India will not only be able to improve the quality of higher education, but will also give rise to a generation of skilled and empowered individuals, who can create economic growth and stability in the region.

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Higher education in Northeast India faces problems hampering student performance and institutional development. One of the severest problems that affect many institutions is lack of infrastructure. Most of the colleges and universities do not lean on state-of-the-art facilities such as well-equipped laboratories, libraries, and computer services which are very much required to impart the quality of education. Given that inadequate funding and administrative support are the main reasons of such deficiencies in infrastructure, low accreditation scores from regulatory authorities such as the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) are therefore expected. This also reflects the fact that there is much less competence among the teaching staff; most institutions rely on the use of contract teachers because of financial restraints, thereby contributing to low-quality teaching. The brain drain syndrome aggravates this issue, as the students with most potential tend to migrate to urban places in search of a better prospect, leaving local institutions without potential contenders in their respective academic fields. Besides, students suffer from the lesser labour market value owing to the disconnection from relevance among the curriculum due to excessive theoretical knowledge, which in turn further increases socio-economic inequalities. In order to tackle these problems, stakeholders-governments, institutions, and the community-have to mobilize themselves in creating an education ecosystem conducive to higher learning. First, increased investment in education infrastructure should be made so that institutions get all the required facilities that will enable them to have effective teaching and learning. This may include setting up specialized technical colleges and vocational training schemes to meet the demands of the local employment market. Apart from this, course restructuring makes a necessity to fill the gap between theoretical knowledge and its application. Collaborated efforts from industry to universities can provide students with opportunities of internships and project works, thereby making them suitable for employment. Intensive awareness and rehabilitation programmes are also necessary to mitigate student



abuse of substances to enhance learning outcomes. Families and communities would be able to be part of a holistic environment for recovery through collaborative discussions and awareness avenues to remove stigma attached to addiction. Multi-pronged strategies would be adopted so that Northeast India will not only improve higher education quality, but also provide for a new generation of skilled and empowered people who will steer socio-economic growth and stability in the region.

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