

# Learning in the Midst of Adverse Situation in Assam: Experience from the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about an unprecedented global crisis, creating widespread disruptions across almost every sector of society. Education, traditionally dependent on continuity and structured interaction, emerged as one of the most severely affected domains. With prolonged closure of schools, colleges, and universities, technology became the primary medium of learning, offering opportunities to some while excluding many others. For large sections of learners, digital education was not merely an alternative but a source of further deprivation, exposing deep-rooted structural inequalities. Importantly, the precarious conditions that came to the forefront during the pandemic were not unfamiliar to the students of Assam. For decades, recurring ecological disruptions such as floods, erosion, and displacement, along with social unrest and insurgency, have created similar barriers to learning. The pandemic, therefore, becomes a comparative lens through which the structural weaknesses of Assam's education system can be re-examined. This paper argues that unless education policy and practice in Assam are designed with sensitivity to its ecological and socio-political realities, the gap between privileged and disadvantaged learners will continue to widen.

**Key Words:** Covid-19, Ecology, Education, Hardship, Injustice, Assam

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is widely regarded as one of the most disruptive events of the 21st century. Although pandemics are not new to human history, the scale and intensity of the current crisis made it a defining global phenomenon. Its devastating impact destabilised almost all aspects of human life ranging from health and economy to politics and education. The outbreak forced societies to learn new ways of coping with distress, creating what many describe as a "new normal." Yet, the degree of vulnerability was not uniform; while some managed to adapt with relative ease, others faced extreme hardships. For the education sector in particular, the pandemic revealed deep-seated inequalities that continue to shape access to learning.

Education has always been considered central to social progress and individual empowerment. Unlike certain economic activities that can resume after temporary halts, learning depends on sustained interaction, continuity, and supportive environments. The closure of educational institutions for months at a time interrupted not only formal instruction but also peer interaction, practical learning, and the broader social experience of education. The lockdowns compelled governments and institutions to shift to online modes of teaching. For some students, this transition offered continuity, but for many others, especially in regions with poor infrastructure, it created exclusion. As a result, the pandemic divided learners into categories based on digital access and socio-economic privilege.

Governments in India sought to mitigate this disruption by promoting virtual learning platforms and developing multiple digital initiatives. However, the outcomes were uneven. While elite schools and well-funded universities managed to adapt, students in government-run institutions or those from rural and ecologically vulnerable regions faced systemic disadvantages. This produced a paradox: education became both more accessible for a technologically enabled minority and more distant for the majority who lacked connectivity or devices.

For students in Assam, the hardships of the pandemic were not entirely unfamiliar. Each year, thousands of learners face similar disruptions due to natural calamities such as floods, riverbank erosion, and

displacement. In addition, socio-political unrest, insurgency, and economic marginalisation compound their vulnerability. For children and young people living in such contexts, education is repeatedly interrupted, with little systemic support to compensate for the loss. While the pandemic drew national and global attention to educational inequality, students in Assam have long lived in what may be described as a permanent state of crisis.

The importance of recognising these parallels cannot be overstated. The crisis of Covid-19 serves as a reminder that learning in Assam has always been shaped by a fragile ecological and social environment. Students from marginalised backgrounds, particularly girls, children from displaced families, and those in rural flood-prone areas, remain at a significant disadvantage. The pandemic highlighted their plight, but it also demonstrated the inadequacy of existing policy responses. If the focus remains only on technological fixes without addressing the root causes of vulnerability, inequalities will persist.

This paper therefore examines the implications of Covid-19 for education in Assam by situating it within the broader history of adversity in the region. It analyses how the digital turn in education during the pandemic created new opportunities while simultaneously excluding large sections of learners. It also reflects on the structural disadvantages faced by vulnerable groups and argues for bridging the gap through inclusive and context-sensitive reforms. Finally, it highlights the possibilities of techno-education as a way forward, while stressing that technology alone cannot ensure equity without significant infrastructural, pedagogical, and policy support.

### **Implications of Covid-19**

The Covid-19 pandemic created a global shock that disrupted education in unprecedented ways. With schools and universities closed for extended periods, governments across the world resorted to digital learning as the only viable alternative. At one level, this appeared to be an innovative solution that ensured continuity of education during lockdowns. Yet, the transition to virtual learning also revealed structural inequalities that had long existed but were often overlooked. The pandemic thus functioned as both a magnifier of privilege and a mirror reflecting systemic weaknesses.

In the Indian context, the sudden closure of institutions in March 2020 compelled both teachers and students to adjust to online modes of instruction. While well-funded private schools and central universities swiftly migrated to platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams, the experience was far from uniform. The majority of government schools and state universities struggled to replicate this shift due to limited resources, poor connectivity, and lack of prior exposure to digital pedagogy. As a result, the very measure introduced to prevent the discontinuity of learning ended up producing a new hierarchy among students: those with access to stable internet, personal devices, and supportive environments could continue their education, while those without such resources fell behind.

This digital divide was not merely a technical issue but a socio-economic one. The availability of smartphones, laptops, and reliable internet connections is unevenly distributed across households in India. For many families, especially those in rural areas or engaged in informal occupations, owning a smartphone is itself a luxury, and even when available, it is often shared among multiple members. A survey by the National Sample Survey Organisation prior to the pandemic had already indicated that less than a quarter of households in India had internet access, with the percentage dropping drastically in rural regions. During the lockdown, these inequalities translated into stark educational exclusion, particularly for children from low-income families, girls, and first-generation learners.

In Assam, the impact of these disparities was further compounded by ecological and infrastructural challenges. Floods and riverbank erosion, recurring almost every year, disrupt connectivity and displace families, often forcing them into temporary shelters where access to electricity and digital devices is unthinkable. For students in such situations, online education was not merely difficult but practically impossible. Even where internet facilities exist, frequent power cuts, weak network coverage, and the inability to afford data packages created obstacles. Thus, while urban students with better facilities managed to adapt, vast numbers of rural and marginalised students were excluded from the digital turn.

The pandemic also altered the dynamics of teaching. Teachers, many of whom were unfamiliar with online platforms, had to undergo a sudden transition without adequate training or support. For some, this created opportunities to experiment with new forms of pedagogy, but for many others, it caused anxiety and frustration. In rural Assam, where teachers themselves sometimes lacked access to devices or stable networks, conducting online classes became unfeasible. This not only affected the delivery of content but also weakened the teacher–student relationship, which plays a crucial role in sustaining motivation and learning continuity.

Beyond access, the pandemic had psychological and social implications. Students experienced isolation, stress, and uncertainty about their academic future. The absence of peer interaction and extracurricular activities reduced education to the mechanical completion of assignments and online lectures. For many, especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the loss of school as a physical space also meant losing access to mid-day meals, socialisation, and protection from domestic pressures. The gendered dimension of this disruption was particularly significant: reports suggested that many girl students were pushed into domestic labour or early marriage during school closures, making their return to formal education uncertain. Another critical implication of the pandemic was the redefinition of educational priorities. With the shift to online platforms, there was an increasing emphasis on technological solutions such as apps, portals, and

digital content. While these innovations opened possibilities for reimagining pedagogy, they also reinforced the idea that education could be reduced to information delivery. The deeper purposes of education critical thinking, civic responsibility, and holistic development were sidelined in the rush to maintain continuity through digital means. This raises an important question: does the pursuit of technological efficiency risk undermining the broader goals of education?

The pandemic also revealed the fragility of policy frameworks in addressing educational crises. Government initiatives such as digital channels, community radio, and e-learning portals provided some relief, but their reach remained limited. The assumption that technology could serve as a universal substitute ignored the realities of ecological vulnerability, poverty, and uneven development in states like Assam. Consequently, the very groups most in need of educational support were those least able to benefit from these initiatives.

In summary, the implications of Covid-19 for education were multi-layered. It exposed the digital divide as an extension of broader socio-economic inequalities; it highlighted the vulnerability of regions like Assam where ecological disruptions intersect with infrastructural deficits; it challenged teachers and institutions to rethink pedagogy in the absence of physical classrooms; and it forced policymakers to confront the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all solutions. More importantly, it underscored the need to view education not simply as a sector temporarily disrupted by the pandemic but as a domain where systemic fragilities are constantly at play. For Assam, the pandemic did not create new problems but amplified existing ones, reminding us that resilience in education must be built into policy and practice long before crises occur.

### **Adverse Situation in Assam**

The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, while extraordinary in scale, was not entirely unfamiliar for Assam. For decades, students and teachers in the state have navigated an educational environment marked by recurring disruptions, ecological vulnerability, and socio-political unrest. The pandemic, therefore, served less as a new crisis and more as an intensification of difficulties that have long been part of everyday life in Assam. Understanding these adversities is crucial to contextualising the state's educational challenges and to appreciating why national policies often fail to address its specific needs.

Assam's most persistent challenge arises from its fragile ecological setting. Situated in the floodplains of the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers, the state experiences annual floods that displace thousands of families, damage infrastructure, and interrupt livelihoods. Schools are frequently inundated, forcing temporary closures or even permanent relocation. Riverbank erosion, a slow but relentless process, erases villages, farmlands, and entire communities, pushing displaced families into makeshift shelters or resettlement colonies. For children in such environments, education is often the first casualty. Even when schools remain physically intact, the displacement of families means that students are uprooted from familiar institutions and thrust into uncertain circumstances where continuing education becomes a struggle.

These ecological disruptions are compounded by infrastructural inadequacies. Large sections of rural Assam lack proper roads, stable electricity, and reliable digital connectivity. While urban centres like Guwahati or Dibrugarh are relatively better equipped, remote areas remain underserved. The absence of bridges across rivers, poor transportation facilities, and long distances between villages and schools make regular attendance difficult. During the pandemic, these structural limitations were magnified. Where online education was introduced, many students could not participate simply because electricity supply was irregular, internet signals were weak, or families could not afford digital devices. In effect, ecological vulnerability and infrastructural deficit combined to deepen educational exclusion.

The socio-economic context further intensifies this adversity. Assam has a large population engaged in subsistence agriculture, informal labour, and small-scale industries. Household incomes are modest, and many families live below the poverty line. Education, though valued, often competes with immediate economic needs. During crises such as floods or the pandemic, children are frequently withdrawn from school to assist with household labour, farming, or wage-earning activities. For adolescent girls, this burden is particularly heavy, as they are drawn into domestic responsibilities or pressured into early marriage. These patterns, visible even in normal times, were exacerbated by the pandemic when families lost income sources and survival became the priority.

Social unrest and political instability have historically created additional layers of disruption. Assam has witnessed prolonged episodes of insurgency, ethnic conflict, and identity-based movements. At various times, these tensions have resulted in curfews, school closures, or forced migration of communities. Even when violence is not widespread, the atmosphere of uncertainty undermines educational continuity. The pandemic overlapped with these pre-existing tensions, highlighting how education in Assam is shaped not only by global crises but also by the region's own history of instability.

The lived experiences of students reflect the intersection of these multiple adversities. A child in a flood-prone village may lose her school to erosion one year, miss classes due to displacement the next, and face prolonged closure during a pandemic soon after. Teachers, too, often share these hardships, living in the same vulnerable communities and struggling to balance personal survival with professional responsibility. In such a context, education becomes a fragile pursuit, easily derailed by forces beyond the control of learners or educators.

The consequences of this fragility are profound. Learning outcomes are compromised when schooling is repeatedly interrupted. Children who drop out temporarily often fail to return, leading to long-term

educational discontinuity. Even those who remain enrolled may experience gaps in foundational learning, reduced motivation, and a weakened sense of belonging to the school system. For higher education, the challenges are equally severe. University students in rural Assam often face long commutes, poor hostel facilities, and lack of access to libraries or digital resources. The pandemic exposed these limitations, making it clear that while urban students could engage in online classes, many rural students were effectively cut off from higher learning for months at a time.

These adverse conditions also raise questions of justice and equity. Education in Assam cannot be understood in isolation from its ecological and socio-political realities. The “normal” educational experience assumed in national policies—continuous schooling, uninterrupted calendars, stable infrastructure does not exist for many students in the state. For them, disruption is the norm, not the exception. The pandemic made this visible at a national level, but for Assam, it has long been part of the everyday. To ignore this context is to misrecognise the structural disadvantages faced by the region’s learners.

Another important dimension of Assam’s adversity lies in the psychological and social impact on children and families. Displacement due to floods or erosion often means losing not just homes but also community networks, cultural spaces, and a sense of security. Education, under such circumstances, becomes a distant priority. The repeated cycle of loss and adjustment breeds fatigue and resignation, with long-term implications for motivation and aspirations. The pandemic amplified this sense of uncertainty, as children were confined to homes with limited interaction, no peer support, and little clarity about their future. For marginalised communities such as migrants, minorities, and tea garden workers, the intersection of economic precarity and ecological vulnerability created a particularly harsh environment for learning.

In this light, the pandemic can be seen not as an isolated crisis but as part of a continuum of adversities that shape education in Assam. Its significance lies in making visible to the wider world what students and teachers in the state have long known: that learning here is inseparable from the struggles of survival in an ecologically fragile and politically complex region. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to restore education after disruptions but to reimagine it in ways that are resilient to these recurring hardships.

### **Bridging the Gap**

The educational disruptions triggered by Covid-19 laid bare the stark inequalities between privileged and disadvantaged learners. For Assam, these disparities were not new but rather an intensification of vulnerabilities that already existed due to floods, erosion, poverty, and political instability. The central challenge now is to bridge the widening gap in access, participation, and outcomes. This requires more than short-term relief measures or the distribution of devices; it demands systemic reform, sensitive to the lived realities of Assam’s learners.

One of the most significant lessons of the pandemic is that access to education cannot be reduced to the mere provision of content. Digital platforms may transmit information, but they do not guarantee meaningful learning unless embedded within supportive infrastructure and pedagogy. Bridging the gap therefore requires addressing multiple dimensions: physical infrastructure, digital readiness, teacher capacity, socio-economic support, and community participation.

First, infrastructure development must be understood in both traditional and digital terms. Physical schools in flood-prone areas need to be built with resilience in mind on raised plinths, with multipurpose community halls that can serve as shelters during emergencies, and with alternative spaces that allow learning to continue even when institutions are closed. At the same time, digital infrastructure cannot be limited to urban hubs. Reliable internet connectivity, affordable data packages, and stable electricity must extend to rural and remote areas. Without these foundational elements, any attempt at digital inclusion will remain aspirational.

Second, bridging the gap requires rethinking teacher training. The pandemic revealed that many educators were unprepared for digital pedagogy, not because of unwillingness but because professional development had rarely included such skills. Teachers need sustained exposure to technology-enabled teaching methods, not as emergency measures but as integral components of their practice. Importantly, this training must go beyond technical know-how to include strategies for adapting content to diverse learner needs, designing inclusive lessons, and integrating online and offline modes effectively. Teachers are the frontline agents of educational equity; their empowerment is non-negotiable.

Third, policies must explicitly prioritise vulnerable groups. Students from displaced families, tea garden communities, minorities, and low-income households face compounded disadvantages that cannot be resolved through generalised interventions. Targeted scholarships, provision of devices, special mentoring programmes, and psychosocial support are essential to prevent further marginalisation. Gender sensitivity must be central to these policies, given the disproportionate burden placed on girls during school closures and in crisis situations. Equity is not about offering the same resources to all, but about ensuring that those historically excluded receive the additional support needed to access meaningful education.

Fourth, the adoption of blended learning models can help reconcile the advantages of technology with the realities of limited access. Instead of viewing digital education as a replacement for classrooms, it should be deployed as a complementary tool. For example, lessons can be recorded and shared through low-bandwidth platforms, enabling students with intermittent access to engage at their own pace. Printed materials, radio



programmes, and community-based classes can supplement digital efforts, ensuring that no student is excluded due to lack of internet or devices. Such hybrid models are particularly relevant for Assam, where ecological disruptions frequently force temporary school closures.

Fifth, bridging the gap requires deep engagement with local communities. Parents, community leaders, and civil society organisations must be partners in educational planning and implementation. In regions repeatedly affected by floods or displacement, local committees can help create emergency learning spaces, distribute resources, and monitor student participation. Community participation also strengthens accountability, ensuring that policies do not remain abstract directives but translate into practical action at the grassroots.

The financial dimension of bridging the gap cannot be ignored. Investment in education in Assam has historically lagged behind need. Without significant budgetary allocation, the vision of resilient, inclusive education will remain out of reach. Public expenditure must be directed not only towards infrastructure but also towards recurring needs such as teacher recruitment, training, maintenance of facilities, and provision of digital resources. In this regard, the role of the state is crucial: reliance on private initiatives or ad-hoc projects cannot substitute for sustained public commitment.

Equally important is the recognition that bridging the gap is not only about resources but also about mindset. Policymakers often design interventions from a national perspective, assuming uniformity in challenges and solutions. Assam's context, however, demands policies tailored to its ecological and socio-political specificity. For example, flexible academic calendars may be necessary to accommodate periods of flood-induced displacement. Mobile schools or boat schools, already experimented with in some regions, can be institutionalised and expanded. Such context-sensitive approaches acknowledge that resilience in education cannot be imported wholesale but must emerge from local realities.

Bridging the gap also entails addressing the psychological dimensions of education. Crises such as displacement, poverty, and pandemics take a heavy toll on children's mental health. Anxiety, trauma, and uncertainty undermine their ability to focus and learn. Schools must therefore provide not only academic instruction but also psychosocial support, counselling, and safe spaces for expression. Teachers and community workers need training in recognising distress and offering guidance. By integrating mental health into education, the system can help students cope with adversity and maintain continuity in learning.

Finally, bridging the gap requires reimagining education as a tool for empowerment rather than mere survival. Too often, crisis responses treat education as a temporary arrangement, a way to "keep children busy" until normalcy returns. In reality, for students in Assam, normalcy is constantly interrupted by floods, erosion, or social unrest. Education must therefore be designed not as a fragile activity vulnerable to disruption, but as a resilient system that equips learners with the skills to adapt, innovate, and thrive despite adversity. This means cultivating critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic responsibility alongside digital literacy and academic knowledge.

In sum, bridging the gap in Assam demands a holistic, multi-layered strategy. It requires resilient infrastructure, empowered teachers, targeted support for vulnerable groups, hybrid models of learning, active community participation, increased public investment, and context-sensitive policy design. Most importantly, it requires a commitment to equity as the guiding principle. The pandemic may have exposed the fault lines, but the responsibility to repair them rests with sustained, inclusive reform. Only then can education in Assam move from being a fragile endeavour repeatedly disrupted by crises to a resilient system capable of nurturing every learner's potential.

### **Techno-Education: The Way Forward**

The concept of techno-education holds increasing importance today, as a growing number of students are stepping into a new phase of learning shaped by technology. Although access to such resources is still limited and not universally available, a segment of learners particularly those in higher education has already begun engaging with technology-based education. This trend, however, is not entirely new; it began years earlier in Western countries, where developed nations now manage education largely through digital platforms. Consequently, even during the pandemic, their systems experienced minimal disruption. In contrast, many developing nations continue to rely heavily on traditional methods of teaching, primarily restricted to face-to-face classrooms, which has constrained the overall learning process. Western countries, by comparison, have embraced diverse and flexible modes of learning, offering students a wider spectrum of opportunities. Within this framework, India's New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emerges as a significant step toward narrowing the existing gaps. By focusing on student competencies and preparing them for the demands of a globally competitive environment, NEP 2020 seeks to promote greater inclusivity. Its vision is not limited to revising courses and curricula alone but extends to transforming the broader educational structure to ensure equal opportunities for all learners.

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