Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2025, 31(01), 366-375
ISSN: 2148-2403
https://kuey.net/

Research Article

Trends and Patterns of Higher Educational Attainments Among the Youth of Assam: Insights from NSSO's Education Surveys

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Citation: Das and Sen (2025), Trends and Patterns of Higher Educational Attainments Among the Youth of Assam: Insights from NSSO's Education Surveys, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 31(01) 366-375
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v31i1.9328

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Higher education plays a crucial role in shaping the societal and economic development of a region, especially in marginalized areas such as Assam, a north-eastern state of India. It serves as a powerful tool for empowerment, fostering human capital, and enhancing social mobility. Despite Assam's progress in improving higher education, significant disparities still persist, particularly among different socio-economic groups, undermining the potential for equitable development. While enrolment rates have increased over the past decades, these inequalities continue to impact educational outcomes across various segments of the population. This study aims to examine the trends and patterns of higher educational attainment among the youth of Assam, using data from multiple rounds of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) Education Survey. The study analyses disparities across gender, socio-economic groups, and urban-rural settings to understand the gaps in educational attainment. The findings reveal that while there have been notable improvements in educational participation, substantial inequalities remain, especially among different gender, social, and religious groups. Additionally, it has been observed that individuals from wealthier backgrounds tend to have higher educational attainments, and urban areas have experienced more pronounced improvements over the years. The study emphasizes the need for targeted policy interventions to ensure inclusive and equitable access to higher education in Assam, thereby fostering greater societal and economic development.

Keywords: Higher Educational Attainments, Trends, Patterns, National Sample Survey Office, Inequalities

Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's life, and its significance extends across all domains of society, influencing both personal and collective development (Abbas A. E., 2024). More broadly, education is intrinsically linked to the concept of human capital and economic productivity, serving as a foundation for societal progress and individual empowerment (England & Folbre, 2023; Abbas A. E., 2024). In Assam, a state in India's northeastern region, while there has been notable progress in higher education enrolment in recent years, significant disparities persist across different districts (AISHE, 2021). These disparities are evident in enrolment rates, educational attainment levels, access to institutions, and the demographic factors that shape educational accessibility (Agasisti & Maragkou, 2023; Garg, Chowdhury, & SK, 2022; Sabharwal, 2021).
The inequalities in higher education in Assam are influenced by a range of socio-economic factors and regional characteristics, with caste playing a prominent role. In rural areas, the degree of inclusion for Scheduled Tribes (STs) is minimal, with only one-third of the population represented in mainstream educational settings. Scheduled Castes (SCs) have a slightly higher representation at fifty percent, while Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Others have a significantly lower representation, at 0.68 and 0.83, respectively (Suryanarayana, 2020; PM & Smitha, 2021). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals from marginalized groups—such as

STs, SCs, and OBCs—face systemic bias and exclusion, not only in education but across broader development indicators (Varghese, 2021; Raj, 2020).

Furthermore, individuals from lower-income households face substantial barriers to accessing education, which perpetuate cycles of poverty and social inequality (Tiwary, Kumar, & Mishra, 2023; Naveed & Sutoris, 2020; Mishra & Pettala, 2023). These barriers are often compounded by limited financial resources, geographic isolation, and underfunded public education systems, all of which disproportionately impact economically disadvantaged groups (Stack, 2023; Rana, 2024). Gender inequality remains another persistent issue, with girls in many parts of the world, particularly in rural and impoverished regions, continuing to face lower enrolment and higher dropout rates compared to boys (Bertay, Dordevic & Sever, 2020; Eden & Wagstaff, 2021; Dhar, Jain & Jayachandran, 2022).

While global efforts have been made to achieve gender parity in education, these challenges remain entrenched in numerous regions. Extensive literature has highlighted significant disparities in educational enrolment across economic strata, with many studies relying on enrolment and attendance ratios due to their availability and ease of measurement (Blanden, Doepke & Stuhler, 2023; Tomaszewski, Perales, Xiang & Kubler, 2022; Entrich, 2020). However, such metrics fail to fully capture the complexities of educational attainment, as they do not account for students who drop out before completing their education. A more accurate indicator of educational progress is educational attainment, which reflects the cumulative growth of human capital over time and provides a clearer measure of long-term educational development (Tilak & Choudhury, 2021).

This study aims to examine the trends and patterns of higher educational attainment among the youth of Assam, using data from various rounds of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) Education Survey conducted over the past decade. Focusing on the youth population aged 18-23 years, the study seeks to provide insights into how educational achievements have evolved, particularly highlighting variations across gender, rural-urban divides, and socio-economic backgrounds. Assam's distinct socio-cultural and economic characteristics, shaped by its rich history, diverse ethnic groups, and unique geographic location, make it an important region for studying educational disparities. Understanding these trends is critical for policymakers, educational planners, and social scientists who aim to address the challenges and opportunities associated with the development of human capital in Assam. By exploring these issues, this article contributes to the broader discourse on regional educational inequality, particularly concerning how socio-economic and geographic factors influence higher educational outcomes in historically marginalized regions like Assam.

Literature Review

The study of educational attainment, particularly at the higher education level, has gained significant scholarly attention in recent years due to its role as a key driver of socio-economic development. However, educational outcomes in India exhibit considerable regional variation, particularly between the northeastern states and the rest of the country. Assam, with its unique socio-cultural and economic characteristics, offers a vital case for analysing educational trends, especially among its youth population.

Several studies have highlighted regional disparities in educational access and attainment across India, with a particular focus on northeastern states such as Assam. Bhagwati and Sarma (2024) and Mushahary and Basumatary (2020) emphasize that the northeastern region, including Assam, consistently lags behind other Indian states in higher education enrollment and outcomes. One key factor contributing to this disparity is the region's geographical isolation, which limits access to quality educational institutions (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Additionally, socio-political challenges and the historical neglect of educational infrastructure have exacerbated this gap, leaving Assam's educational system underdeveloped compared to other regions (Kumari, Thakur, & Bhandari, 2020).

Socio-economic status (SES) is widely recognized as a critical determinant of educational attainment. Research by Adeel, Daniel, and Botelho (2023), as well as Zapp and Lerch (2020), demonstrates that factors such as income inequality, parental education, and household resources significantly influence educational outcomes across India (Saravanakumar & Padmini Devi, 2020; Yousaf, Mishra & Bashir, 2020; Sanyal, 2024). Assam's predominantly agrarian economy and rural population face significant economic challenges that further restrict access to higher education (Upadhyaya, 2022). Baruah (2014) underscores those economic constraints, especially in rural areas, limit access to quality education, thereby stunting higher educational attainment among Assam's youth. Moreover, the disparities between rural and urban areas in Assam contribute to educational inequalities, as urban canters benefit from better infrastructure, resources, and institutional support.

Assam's diverse socio-cultural fabric, composed of various ethnic and linguistic communities, introduces additional complexity to educational attainment. Choudhury (2013) explores how cultural and linguistic diversity in Assam affects educational outcomes, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Indigenous communities often speak their own languages, which creates barriers to accessing the mainstream educational system, where instruction is predominantly in Assamese or English. This linguistic and cultural alienation, compounded by economic disadvantages, has been shown to contribute to lower educational attainment among marginalized communities, highlighting the need for culturally inclusive educational policies.

Gender also plays a significant role in educational outcomes in Assam. Studies by Basu and Mukherjee (2008) indicate that gender inequality in educational attainment persists across India, with women—especially from

rural areas—having lower access to higher education compared to men. In Assam, these gender disparities are exacerbated by traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and economic constraints, all of which limit young women's opportunities to pursue higher education. Although female enrollment rates have improved in recent years, gender gaps persist in terms of completion rates and access to quality institutions (Ahmed, 2020). These persistent inequalities underscore the ongoing challenges to achieving gender parity in Assam's higher education system.

Various government policies have been introduced to improve educational access and quality in Assam and other northeastern states. The National Education Policy (2020) prioritizes inclusive education and aims to bridge regional disparities. Initiatives such as the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) and the establishment of new universities and colleges in the northeastern region are part of efforts to enhance higher education outcomes. However, Bhuyan and Das (2019) point out that the implementation of these policies has been uneven, with rural Assam still facing significant challenges related to infrastructure, teacher availability, and educational resources. These challenges suggest that while policies may be in place, they have yet to reach their full potential in improving educational outcomes in rural areas.

Studies focusing on decadal trends in educational attainment in Assam further emphasize the slow pace of progress. Chakraborty (2018) examines literacy and higher education rates in Assam from 2001 to 2011, noting improvements in literacy but highlighting the sluggish growth of higher education enrollment. Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reveals a general increase in enrollment rates, but socio-economic disparities and urban-rural divides persist. Bora (2021) argues that these trends reflect entrenched inequalities in Assam's educational system, where rural and marginalized communities continue to be underserved despite national efforts to improve educational access.

In conclusion, the existing literature on educational attainment in Assam illustrates the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related factors that influence educational outcomes among youth. While there has been some progress in improving access to education, significant challenges remain, particularly in addressing rural-urban disparities, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural barriers. This study seeks to build on the existing body of work by offering a decadal analysis of higher educational attainment trends among Assam's youth, providing insights that could guide future educational policies and initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive development in the region.

Methodology

Data source

This study utilizes data from several rounds of the NSSO's "Participation and Expenditure in Education" surveys, specifically the 64th, 71st, and 75th rounds. The NSSO follows a stratified multi-stage sampling methodology, selecting census villages and urban frame survey blocks as first-stage units, and households as ultimate stage units, based on population and affluence. For the 64th round (2007-2008), 445,960 individuals were surveyed, with 63,318 households from rural areas and 37,263 from urban areas. The 71st round (2014) surveyed 29,447 urban and 36,479 rural households. The 75th round (2017-2018) continued this methodology, focusing on educational participation and expenditure, with a sample size of 1,941 individuals aged 18-23 years in the present study. The use of data from multiple NSSO rounds allows for a detailed analysis of trends in educational attainment, socio-economic factors, and regional disparities.

Selection of Variables

The study incorporates a range of variables to capture the multi-dimensional trends in educational attainment. These include district names, educational levels, and social demographics such as Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, and other groups. Additionally, religious demographics (Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and others) and economic stratification by wealth quintiles are considered. The study also differentiates between urban and rural populations. The inclusion of these diverse variables allows for a comprehensive analysis of educational trends, highlighting the intersections of social, economic, and regional factors in shaping educational outcomes.

Methods

This study employs descriptive statistics to analyse and compare educational attainment across districts and survey rounds. It examines general trends and fluctuations in educational levels, with a focus on variations within different social groups, religious affiliations, genders, and economic strata. Educational data from the 64th, 71st, and 75th rounds of the NSSO survey are utilized, with percentile comparisons made to track changes in educational attainment over time. These comparisons highlight growth, decline, or variability in attainment levels across districts. Additionally, the study assesses regional disparities in educational completion rates, specifically examining geographical areas such as the Plain Eastern, Plain Western, Cachar Plains, and Central Brahmaputra Plains regions.

Result and Discussion

Prevalence of higher educational attainments among different districts of Assam

The prevalence of higher educational attainment across various districts of Assam over the years, as presented in Table 1. Some districts exhibit consistent growth across the three survey periods. For instance, Morigaon shows a steady increase in educational attainment, rising from 5.65 at the 64th percentile to 8.44 at the 75th percentile. Similarly, Kamrup Metropolitan experiences growth, with educational attainment rising from 12.07 at the 64th percentile to 14.73 at the 75th percentile.

Conversely, certain districts such as Nagaon and Goalpara show declines in educational attainment, with Nagaon dropping from 4.95 at the 64th percentile to 2.55 at the 75th percentile, and Goalpara increasing from 0.4 to 4.86. These fluctuations may be attributed to various factors, including shifts between percentile groups and other contextual changes over time.

Noteworthy fluctuations are observed in districts like Cachar, where educational attainment declines sharply from 17.79 at the 64th percentile to 0.16 at the 71st percentile, before rising again to 7.18 at the 75th percentile. These steep changes indicate possible outliers or data variability. Another significant fluctuation occurs at the 71st percentile, where a peak of 19.67 is followed by a drastic decline to 2.07 by the 75th percentile, further emphasizing the irregularity in the data patterns.

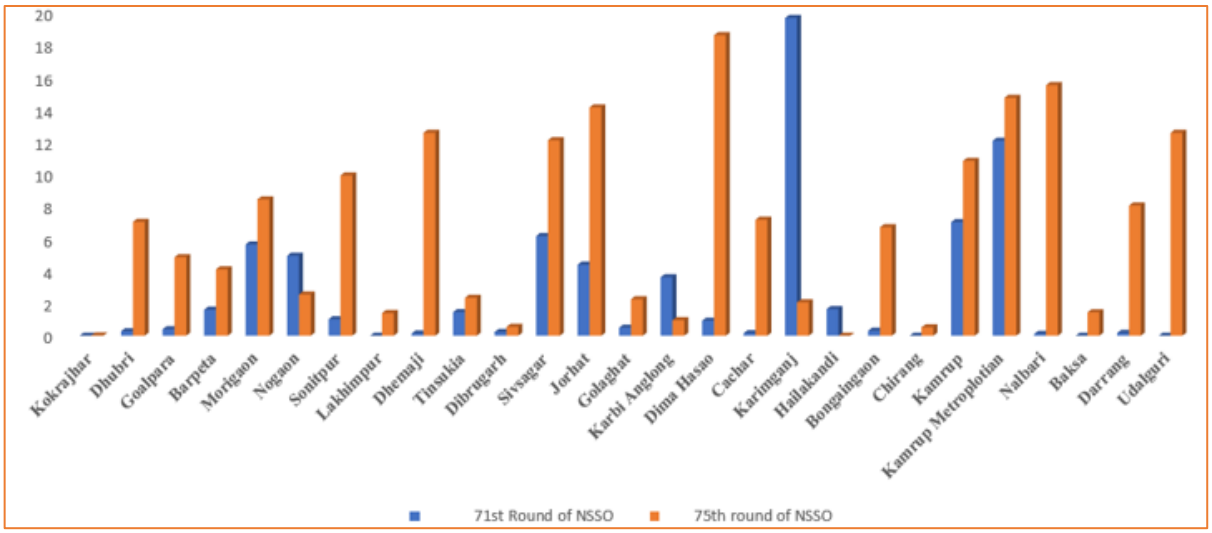
Table 1: Trends of the Prevalence of Higher Educational Attainments across the different districts of Assam

District Name	64th Round NSSO Education Survey	71st Round NSSO Education Survey	75th Round NSSO Education Survey
Sonitpur	1.62	1.02	9.92
Tinsukia	0.48	1.46	2.35
Dibrugarh	3.79	0.23	0.55
Sivsagar	3.75	6.17	12.1
Jorhat	10.18	4.4	14.13
Golaghat	4.48	0.5	2.26
Cachar	17.79	0.16	7.18
Karimganj	0.46	19.67	2.07
Hailakandi	2.8	1.65	0
Bongaigaon	5.91	0.31	6.72
Kamrup	2.48	7.03	10.82
Nalbari	0.04	0.11	15.51
Kokrajhar	NA	NA	0.02
Dhubri	NA	0.28	7.05
Goalpara	NA	0.4	4.86
Barpeta	NA	1.61	4.11
Morigaon	NA	5.65	8.44
Nogaon	NA	4.95	2.55
Lakhimpur	NA	NA	1.4
Dhemaji	NA	0.14	12.56
Karbi Anglong	NA	3.62	0.96
Dima Hasao	10.9	0.93	18.6
Kamrup Metropolitan	NA	12.07	14.73
Baksa	NA	NA	1.45
Chirang	NA	NA	0.52
Darrang	NA	0.17	8.06
Udalguri	NA	NA	12.56
Assam	2.45	3.03	6.4
India	6.35	8.32	10.6

Source: Compiled by authors from various rounds of NSSO's Education Survey

In terms of Districts with Moderate Consistency, Sivasagar shows gradual growth, increasing from 3.75 (64th round) to 12.1 (75th round), which suggests steady development. Similarly, Kamrup and Kamrup Metropolitan also demonstrate a consistent upward trend across the intervals, pointing to gradual improvements in these districts. High Values were found in certain pockets, and Kamrup Metropolitan and Jorhat consistently showed high values. This may be seen as a potential advantage in terms of economic, social, or infrastructural development. Nalbari and Udalguri, peaking at 15.51 and 12.56 respectively at the 75th round, also reflected significant growth at the higher percentiles. Some districts show Small or No Data; for example, Baksa and Chirang show data for the 75th round of NSSO Education Survey only, indicating an inadequate availability or unrelevance of data for earlier periods.

Figure 1: Percentage of People, Aged 18-23, Having Higher Education across Different Districts of Assam



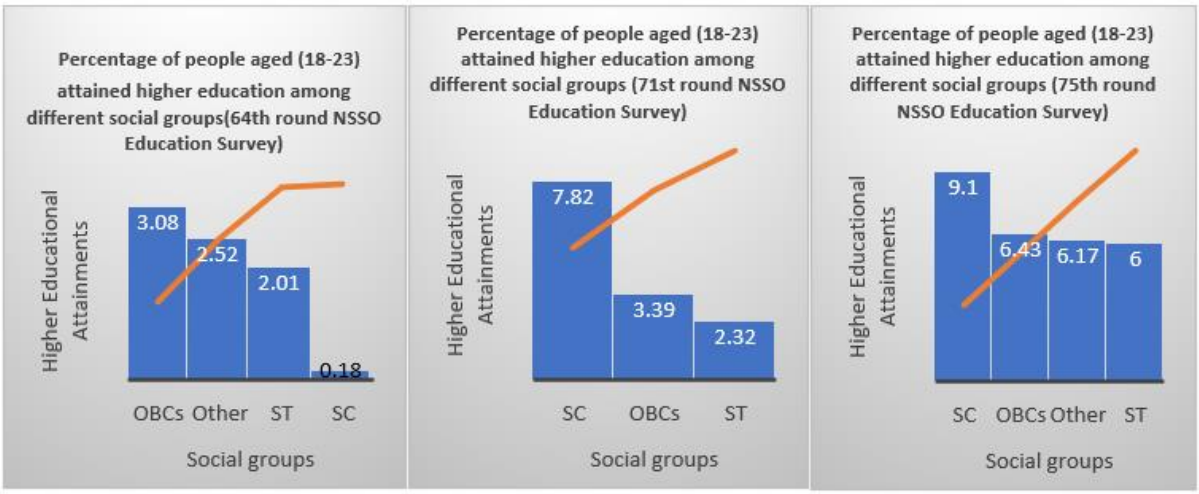
Source: Compiled by authors from various rounds of NSSO's education survey

Similarly, Lakhimpur and Kokrajhar provide single values, possibly indicating missing data or minimal variability across the intervals. Comparing Assam and India, the data shows that Assam's values rise from 2.45 (64th round round) to 6.4 (75th round round), whereas India's values increase more significantly from 6.35 to 10.6 over the same period. This translates to the fact that although Assam numbers are lower than the national average, it displays an almost parallel growth pattern, hence better at both district and country levels.

Educational attainments patterns among diverse socio-economic and demographic groups of Assam

The percentage of higher educational attainments among different socio-economic groups is illustrated in Figure 2. Scheduled Tribes have risen from 2.01 for the 64th round to 6 for the 75th round; hence, an intensive rise in representation can be indicated. Scheduled Castes also rose sharply, from 0.18 for the 64th round to 9.1 in the 75th round. OBC also increased but in a more moderate manner, jumping from 3.08 in the 64th round to 6.43 in the 75th round. The Other category has been rising steadily from 2.45 in the 64th round to 6.48 in the 75th round.

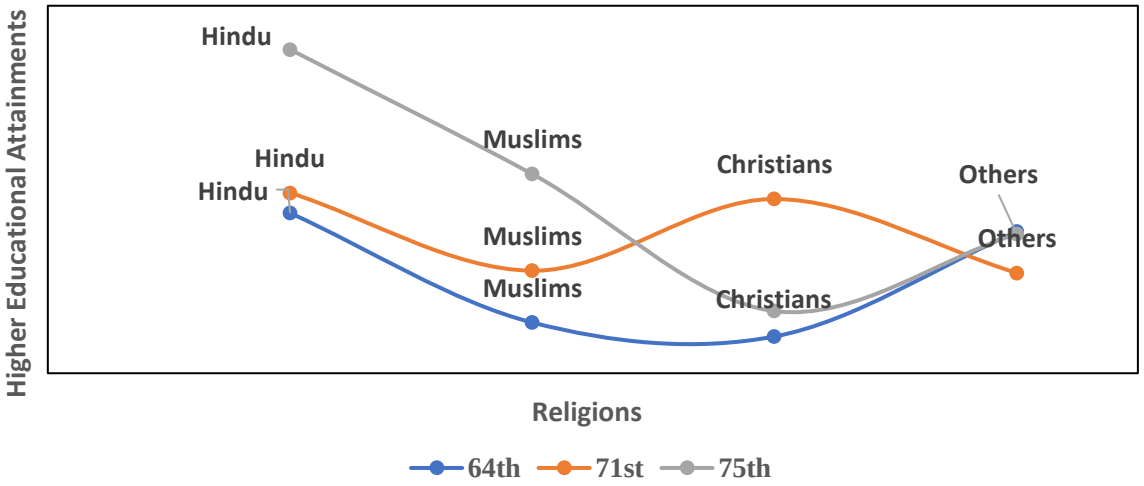
Figure 2: Prevalence of Higher Educational Attainments across various Socio-Economic Groups



Source: Prepared by authors from various rounds of NSSO's education survey

The figure 3 illustrates the percentage of higher education attainment across different religious groups. The religious groups also followed different trends. Hindus increased gradually from 3.36 in the 64th round to 7.81 in the 75th round. Muslims increased substantially from 0.38 in the 64th round to 4.42 in the 75th round, which denotes increasing proportion. Meanwhile, the Data for Christians is less stable and even does not have value at 64th round, and just registered a sharp drop to 0.69 at 75th round. The Others religious category declined from 2.85 within the 64th round to 2.79 within the 75th round.

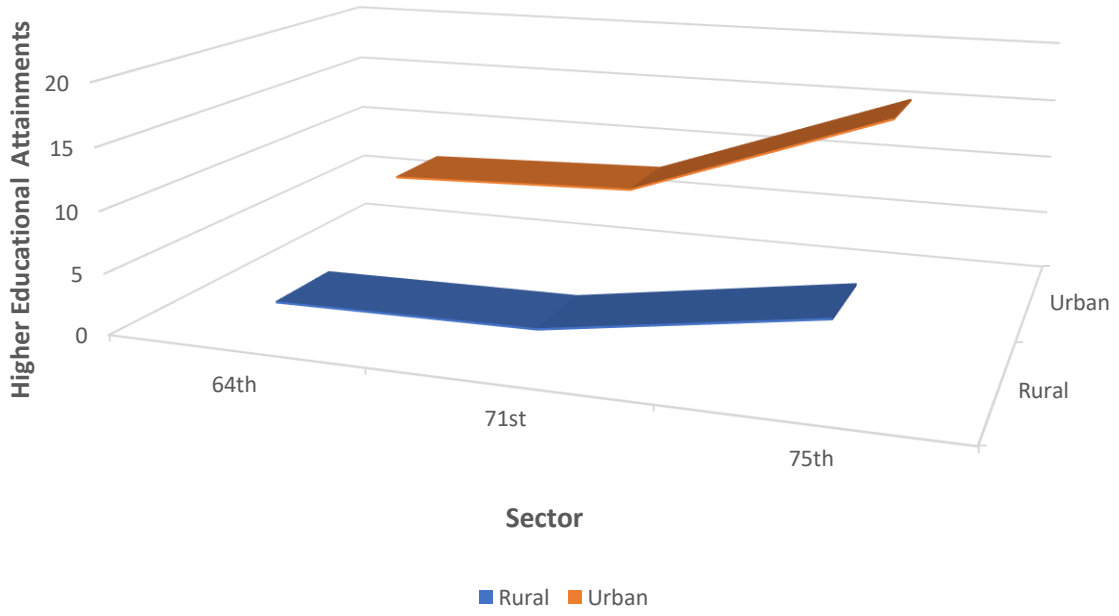
Figure 3: Prevalence of Higher Educational Attainments across various Religious Groups



Source: Prepared by authors from different rounds of NSSO's education survey

The prevalence of higher education between two sectors is depicted in figure 4. In this context, the representation of rural has been upward from 1.91 in the 64th round to 5.48 in the 75th round. On the other hand, although the Urban sector had more upslope, it grew at a more intense rate-from 7.11 in the 64th round to 15.53 in the 75th round. This depicts development at a faster pace and a higher representation of an urban population.

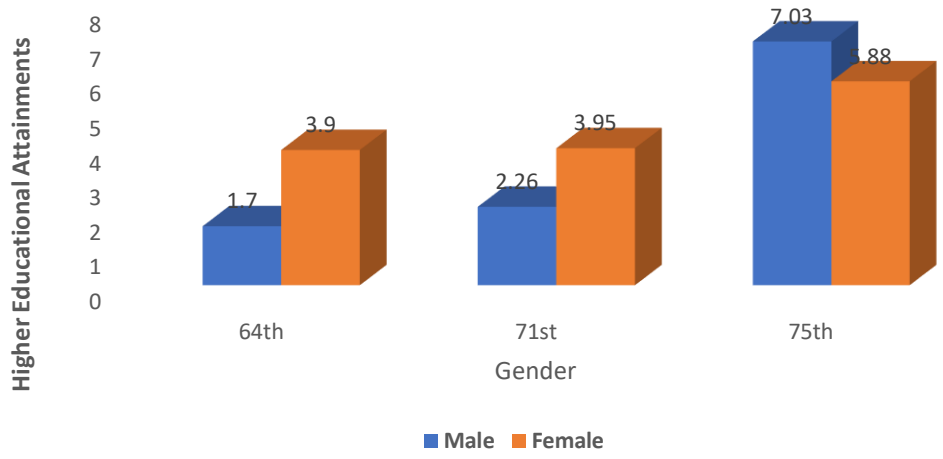
Figure 4: Prevalence of Higher Educational Attainments among Sectors



Source: Prepared by authors from different rounds of NSSO's education survey

Gender representation has increased over time, with the percentage of males rising from 1.7 in the 64th round to 7.03 in the 75th round. Females also saw an increase, though at a slower pace, from 3.9 in the 64th round to 5.88 in the 75th round. Overall, both genders experienced growth, though the rate of increase was slightly higher for males. Figure 5 below illustrates this trend.

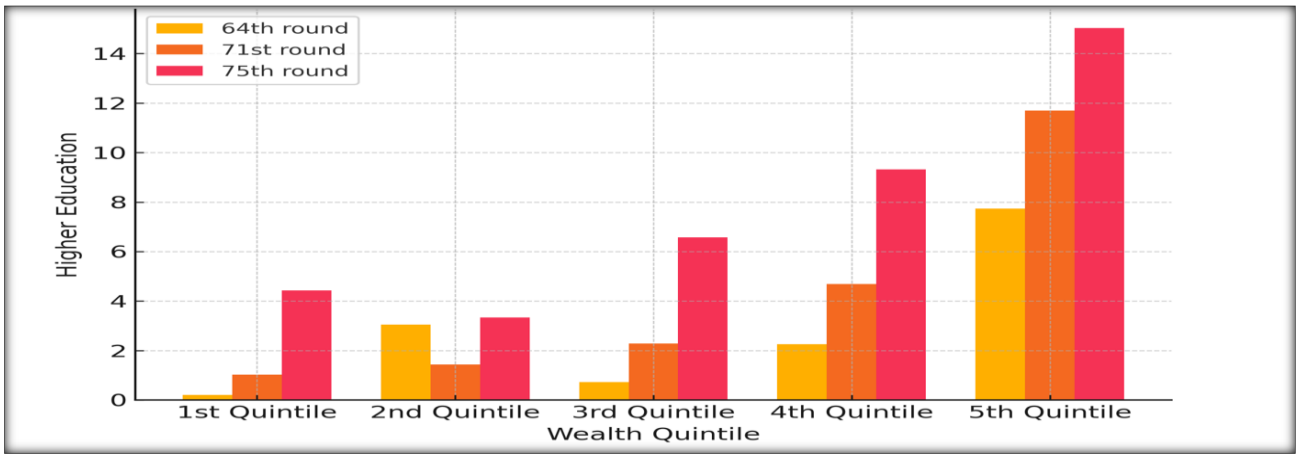
Figure 5: Gender-Wise Prevalence of Higher Educational Attainments in Assam



Source: Prepared by authors from different rounds of NSSO's education survey

Figure 6 below clearly illustrates the upward trend of quintiles along the economic strata. Lower quintiles, such as the 1st wealth quintile, increased from 1.03 in the 71st round to 4.43 in the 75th round, while the 2nd wealth quintile rose from 1.43 to 3.34 over the same period. Higher quintiles experienced more significant growth, with the 3rd wealth quintile rising from 2.28 to 6.57, the 4th wealth quintile from 4.68 to 9.32, and the 5th wealth quintile from 11.7 to 15.03. This pattern highlights a strong correlation between wealth and increased representation across the rounds.

Figure 6: Economic-Status wise Prevalence of Higher Educational Attainments in Assam



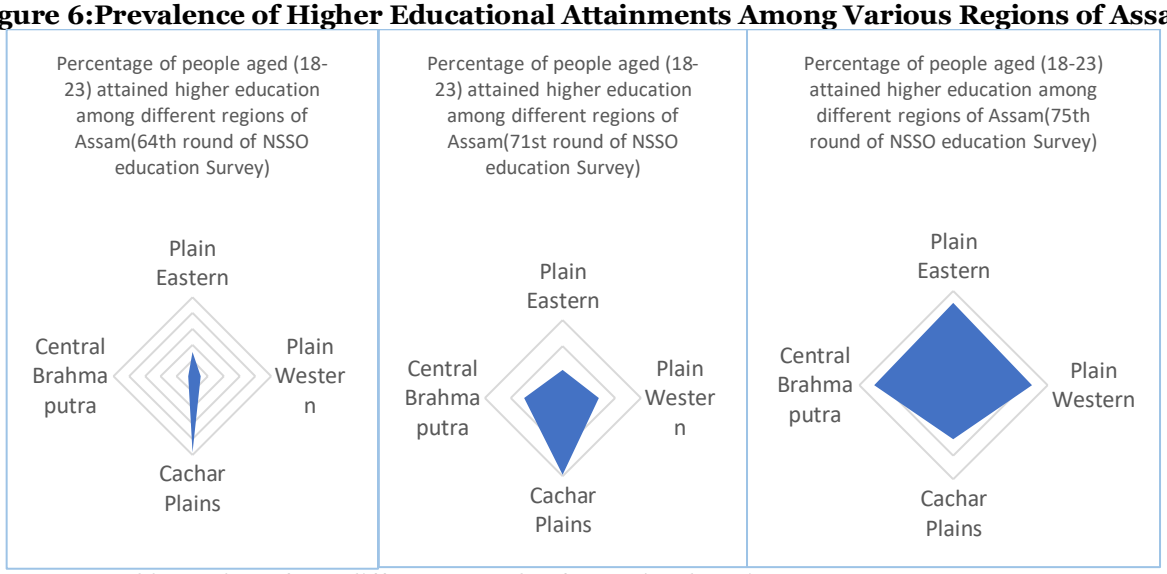
Source: Prepared by authors from different rounds of NSSO's education survey

Disparities in Higher Educational Attainments Among Different Regions of Assam

Figure 7 highlights significant regional variations. In the Plain Eastern region (181), the trend showed steady growth, rising from 3.07 in the 64th round to 6.99 in the 75th round. Similarly, the Plain Western region (182) saw an increase from 1.06 to 6.67 over the same period. In contrast, the Cachar Plains region (183) exhibited a decline, with representation decreasing from 9.65 in the 64th round to 4.6 in the 75th round. The Central Brahmaputra Plains region (184) experienced consistent growth, moving from 0.52 to 6.74. Overall, the data indicates a clear upward trend in total representation, increasing from 2.45 in the 64th round to 6.48 in the

75th round. Across social, religious, and demographic groups, representation has generally improved over time, with faster growth observed in urban areas and higher economic quintiles.

Figure 6:Prevalence of Higher Educational Attainments Among Various Regions of Assam



Source: Prepared by authors from different rounds of NSSO's education survey

Conclusion and Policy Suggestion

The analysis of higher educational attainments across districts of Assam reveals a mixed pattern of growth, stagnation, and decline. Districts such as Kamrup Metropolitan, Jorhat, and Sivasagar exhibit consistent progress, while others like Cachar and Karimganj show sharp fluctuations, indicating inconsistencies in access and participation. Assam as a whole remains below the national average, though it follows a similar trajectory of gradual improvement. Socio-economic and demographic variations further highlight disparities, with Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes demonstrating significant growth in higher education participation, while Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the general category have shown moderate but steady increases. Religious groups also exhibit diverse trends, with Hindus and Muslims showing an upward trajectory, while Christian face instability in representation. Urban areas continue to outpace rural regions in higher education attainments, emphasizing the role of infrastructure and economic conditions in educational access. Similarly, wealth quintiles show a strong correlation with educational progress, with higher quintiles experiencing steeper growth compared to lower quintiles, reinforcing the existing socio-economic divide. To address these disparities and enhance higher educational attainments across Assam, targeted policy interventions are essential. Expanding access to higher education in rural and economically disadvantaged areas through scholarships, financial aid, and infrastructural improvements can help bridge gaps. Strengthening secondary education and vocational training, particularly for lower wealth quintiles and marginalized communities, will facilitate smoother transitions into higher education. Special focus should be placed on regions with fluctuating or declining trends, such as Cachar and Karimganj, to identify and address local challenges. The government should also promote digital learning initiatives and establish higher education institutions in underserved districts to decentralize opportunities. Additionally, awareness campaigns and incentives for female education can help reduce gender disparities. Ensuring equitable growth across social, economic, and regional groups will be crucial in fostering inclusive educational development in Assam.

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