

## Study of Drop-Outs at the Primary Level of Schooling at the Borbaruah Block in the District of Dibrugarh, Assam

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**ABSTRACT** As the State of Assam has since time immemorial been an agriculture land par excellence the Assamese people are very much engaged in agricultural activities. As the people depend upon manual labour for agriculture and other works, a large number of working hands are necessary to have staple food for lasting for the year round. The yield of paddy depends upon the labour input in land. It is therefore difficult on the part of a cultivator family to spare any family working hand for non-income generating work. Dire poverty and sheer subsistence living cause the need of engagement of all the members of a family, including the young children, in the process of eking out a livelihood. As a perpetual process in the family life, it leads to drop-out of children from schools in the early age groups.

### INTRODUCTION

The Assamese people are generally agriculturists. They work on land, especially during the rainy season prevailing from April/May to July/August. Mostly, the people of Assam raise just a single crop, the *sali* paddy, the staple crop of the people, for home consumption. Agriculture is hardly practised with commercial outlook or profit motive. The staple crop is basically meant for subsistence living. Generally, the people cultivate lands that are small in size, each family of five to seven members processing a plot of land varying from 1 to 3 acres on an average. The annual yield of the crop is so meagre that it puts the life of the people at stake. Failure of the crop for some reason or other or low yield is fraught with ominous consequences—shortage of food, and for that matter all other basic needs of life forces people to live from hand to month. Land is thus the most coveted property in an Assamese rural household. And the processing of land for the prime crop of the season is equally important. The land is manually ploughed with the help of bullocks or buffaloes. Besides the able-bodied sturdy man behind the

plough, there are other accessory works especially in connection with tending the cattle, processing of the land including weeding, hoeing, etc. and multiple other odd jobs in the household. Very few people of the village can engage agricultural labourers for the various domestic odd jobs, especially during the prime agricultural months. For complete processing 3 acres of land on an average, from the beginning of the sowing season till harvesting, manual labour of at least 4 persons is inevitable, and this labour is naturally provided by the inmates of the family.

In Assam there is no irrigation system. The people depend very much on monsoon rains for cultivation. The lands are fertile, soft and loamy. Ploughing is not a very labourious job in Assam compared to other regions of the country. But the people are habitually given to agricultural work in the field not more than 2 to 3 hours a day. The work in the agricultural field is also divided amongst the members of a family. While the elderly males engage themselves in the preparation of the soil by ploughing and harrowing, the womenfolk perform household jobs along with various petty works in the field. The children have their own allocation of the domestic work in the family. Tending drought animals and collection of firewood and fishing are the most engaging domestic works for the children, especially the young male ones. The young girls are invariably engaged in most culinary works and drawing of water and cleaning of utensils and clothes. It seems children are born to work right from the age of six or seven. Further, the children both males and females, virtually in some way or other are the earning members of the family. At times they are also engaged to sell small wares and seasonal vegetables produced in the kitchen garden in the daily evening markets. In fact, children could have hardly any time for games and sports, not to speak of schooling. On the whole,

earning of petty amounts of money through sale of domestic goods, especially vegetables, is a most engaging job of the village children. It could thus be observed that rural children serve as the vital part of a household's socio-economic basis. It is to be borne in mind that children stand as the part and parcel of the economic life of a family, and as such they could hardly be spared for education, for some 4 to 5 hours a day.

In the context of the aforesaid delineation of an Assamese rural household, it is proposed to understand the extent of the young children, both male and female, leaving schools at a very odd stage in the prime of life. The type of children leaving school at a very young age is a day-to-day feature to be seen in the Assamese rural life. It is therefore proposed that the village's odd problems be studied in the true perspective through ethnographic methods. Such a study has been taken up in respect of "school drop-outs." It is basically an important rural phenomenon that hampers the future progress and prosperity of the Assamese villages, in the sense that the children, the future bread-winners of the society, would never hold any prospective outlook, if the present state of socio-economic life continues.

#### METHODOLOGY

Field work for understanding the problem of drop-outs was undertaken in five villages since 1993 for a total period of nearly five months. The villages come under one civil administrative block, namely, the Borbaruah Block in the district of Dibrugarh. The study was confined to the Primary and Middle Education levels of schooling, covering a total academic period of 7 years from class I to class VII. The studies covered pupils of both the sexes; age-wise they range from five to twelve or thirteen years.

The study is expected to reveal the number of pupils dropping out over the period under study. The data have been collected from the school registers. A close scrutiny of the registers over a period showed the number of drop-out in the particular schools. It was noted that the names enrolled in a particular year missing after four years of schooling are not all drop-outs, there might be names who have not been promoted to

the next higher class or who might have been transferred to some other schools. Failures in promotion and transfer have been avoided from the purview of this study.

Having determined the number of drop-outs in a particular school, efforts were made to meet parents of those pupils leaving the school. The parents were thus interviewed in order to understand the cause of non-completion of schooling by their wards. Data thus collected from the parent in fact reveal the cause of drop-out.

#### RESULTS

It might be noted that successive last seven 5-year plans have brought uncertain degree of socio-economic development associated with social awakening. But it has not reached all and sundry of the society. Glaring disparity of wealth is noticed especially in the rural and semi-urban areas. A substantial section of the population are seen to be groaning under dire poverty in these regions, as seen in the sample data presented here. Various factors cripple the life-patterns of these people. While agriculture is the mainstay of a large section of these rural and semi-urban people, either as cultivators or as agricultural labourers, most of them live from hand to mouth owing to lack of land, the prime source of livelihood. Landlessness is the prime cause of poverty among these people. Search for two square meals a day keeps the mass people away from striving for uplift in the life-style. Under such a situation, children serve as the only economic asset for the family, collecting firewood for the family kitchen, fishing in the nearby water source and selling the catch for cash, or serving as domestic servants or maids in the nearby towns or doing multiple other petty jobs in and around the household.

In the ultimate analysis the most important factor that stands out in sustaining the problem of drop-out is that the economic needs supercedes the value of education. Not that people in general do not attach value to education. The mass people's work potentiality could be maximally mobilized to utilize and augment the available resources by which life-patterns could be enhanced.

Table 1 shows the number of drop-outs in the

five villages surveyed over a period of five years from 1991 to 1995. The five schools belonging to the five villages record a total of 127 pupils leaving school without completing the Lower Primary or Middle English School standard. It might be noted that all those villages are situated around

lages. In those days most of the school premises were seen to be very thinly attended by young boys and girls compared to school-attendance, say, nearly 10 years back. The present study shows a relatively good attendance. Yet, school drop-out at an early stage of learning has not

**Table 1 : Drop-out over the period from 1991-1995**

Village	School	1991		1992		1993		1994		1995		Total
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Laluka gaon	Laluka gaon L.P. School	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	17
Rajabhata	Rajabhata L.P. School	1	2	1	2	2	3	1	3	2	1	18
Nagakhelua	Nagakhelua Hindi Pathshala	2	2	2	4	2	3	4	3	1	3	26
Kumaranichiga	Kumaranichiga Balika Bidyalaya	-	5	-	4	-	7	-	5	-	8	29
Borpathar	Borpathar Boys' H.E. School	7	-	6	-	8	-	9	-	7	-	37
Total		12	10	10	11	13	15	16	14	12	14	
Grand Total		22		21		28		30		26		127

the major town of Dibrugarh, a town of commercial hubhub and seat of learning in the district. None of the villages is more than 5 kms. away from the town of Dibrugarh - most of the villages are in regular touch in one way or other with the town of Dibrugarh. In fact, the villages under study have received substantial impact from the town. Since over the past two decades it had been empirically observed that there were mass unschooled young boys and girls in these vil-

disappeared.

Table 2 shows the classes in which the drop-out under study occurred. It could be noted from the table that more drop-outs occurred in the higher than in the lower classes.

Having assessed the total perspective on drop-outs in the five villages, the interviews with the parents of the boys and girls revealed the most important socio-economic factors causing the drop-outs in the villages.

**Table 2 : Showing sex and class of the Drop-outs**

Years of Drop-out	I		II		III		IV		V		VI		VII		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
1991	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	4	6	2	2	1	1	3	22
1992	-	-	-	1	-	2	3	5	4	1	-	2	3	-	21
1993	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	5	2	4	3	2	4	4	28
1994	-	-	2	-	-	-	4	2	2	7	5	3	3	2	30
1995	-	2	-	-	3	2	2	3	2	3	1	2	4	2	26
Total	-	2	2	1	6	4	13	19	16	17	11	10	15	11	
Grand Total	2		3		10		32		33		21		26		127

### DISCUSSION

In Assam, poverty of the rural masses is a chronic plight. It is an age-old feature of the Assamese village life. The typical day-to-day life based on subsistence economy goes on as a normal way of life. This economy is primarily based on a single-crop cultivation which is very much dependent on the vagaries of nature. Given congenial season with sufficient rain, without drought or flood or swarms of insects or hail-storm, a good quantity of staple could be harvested, and family life is expected to go on normally the year round. The people's day-to-day plight of life beggars description in the event of any disruption in the cycle of the agricultural process. Shortage of the staple food tells heavily upon the life of the inmates of a household, once the crop fails for some reason or other. Under such an eventuality all become very much concerned with the very question of survival.

A poverty-ridden life of the Assamese rural population is least imbued with any future prospect of a well-to-do life. There is hardly any sources of impetus. Multiple day-to-day life's constraints dissuade the Assamese village population from sending their children to school. Under such a circumstance, school drop-outs come as an inevitable factor in the Assamese rural life.

It is sheer inability on the part of the parents to provide school amenities that parents become inclined to drop their ward's study even at the primary stage. Also parents cannot forego their

children's labour for domestic support. The boys right from the age of seven are supposed to render various types of help to parents. Besides ploughing the field, boys are engaged in the tending of cattle in the village pasture ground, fishing, collecting firewood, etc. At times, they are engaged in processing the agricultural fields during the sowing season. Often, the boys are sent to the daily evening market to sell vegetable, fruits, etc. Apart from the boys, the girls also have their domestic activities. The entire onus of looking after the younger siblings and doing odd household jobs like cleaning utensils, weaving, sewing, washing of clothes, etc. is shared by the girl-child of the family. Notionally, girl-children are meant for their expertise for household jobs which are treated as qualities for being a good bride. This is the reason why girls' education is not much encouraged. These are reasons which presently are hampering the young children from attending schools at various levels.

It might be understood that over the last 20 years or so though there has been a good deal of socio-economic progress in the villages under study; yet there is a section of population in the villages who have not achieved any progress in the economic life whatsoever. These are in fact the people who are normally referred to as those coming below the so-called line of poverty. As long as the economic status of the people below poverty-line is not heightened and the people do not understand the value of education, the problem of drop-out cannot be done away with.