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Title: Closure and Amalgamation of Government Schools in Assam. Issues, Challenges and Implications

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Abstract: The rationalization, closure, and amalgamation of government schools have become key strategies of education reform in Assam to address low enrolment, teacher shortages, and inefficient resource use. While consolidation promises administrative and financial benefits, it raises critical concerns regarding equitable access to education, especially for children in rural, remote, tribal, and economically disadvantaged communities. This paper examines the issues, challenges and implications of schools amalgamation in Assam using a qualitative and analytical approach. It draws on government reports, policy documents, RTE Act 2009, educational statistics and ground-level reports. The analysis focuses on accessibility, enrolment, dropout, teacher workload, child safety, and community participation within Assam's context of difficult terrain, dispersed settlements and poor transport. The paper recommends a contest-specific, child-centered and participatory approach to school rationalization, with prior accessibility assessments, transport provision and community consultation. It concludes that administrative efficiency must not override the constitutional commitment to equitable and accessible education in Assam.

Keywords: School Amalgamation, Educational Equity, Assam, RTE Act 2009, Rural Education, Accessibility.

INTRODUCTION:

Education is not merely an instrument of individual advancement but a fundamental component of a social justice, equality, human development and democratic citizenship. In Indian, the expansion of government schooling after independence, particularly through programmes such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), subsequently Samagra Shiksha, sought to bring school closer to children and reduce geographical, social and economic barriers to elementary education. The principle of the neighborhood schools became central to this expansion.³ The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 places a responsibility on the appropriate government and local authority to ensure the availability of the schools within prescribed neighborhood limits. The Central RTE rules provide a walking-distance norm of one kilometer for children in Class I-V and three kilometers for Class VII-VIII, while also recognizing the need for relaxation and alternative arrangements in areas characterized by difficult terrain, floods, landslides,

inadequate roads or other safety risks. The question of physical access has acquired renewed significance in the context of the growing trend towards school rationalization, closure and amalgamation. The policy argument behind consolidation is not without justification. Very small schools, particularly those with extremely low enrolment or a single teacher, can face difficulties in maintain an adequate teacher-pupil ratio, providing subject specific teachers, utilizing infrastructure efficiently and ensuring board range of educational activities. The National Educational Policy (*NEP*) 2020 therefore promotes the idea of school complexes or clusters for greater resource efficiency, sharing of teachers and facilities, improves governance and academic collaboration. Importantly, however, the policy also recognizes the special difficulties of remote rural areas, where settlements are dispersed and schools may have low enrollment because of geographical and demographic conditions. The implementation challenge is consequently not simply whether schools should be consolidated, but where, why, how, and under what safeguards such consolidation should take place.

This tension between administrative efficiency and educational accessibility is particularly important in Assam. The state's geographical diversity includes riverine and char areas, tea-garden communities, forest and hill regions, flood-prone settlements, border areas and remote tribal habitations. In such context, a school located within or near a village often more than an educational institution: it may function as a community center and as the most accessible public institution children from economically and socially vulnerable households. Consequently, the physical removal of a school-even where another institution technically remains available- may alter the actual cost and feasibility of schooling for children.

The Assam government has been pursuing school amalgamation as part of its resource-rationalization strategy for several years. The state's Siksha Khetra framework provides for the amalgamation or merger of schools in the same campus or in nearby areas into a single administrative and academic unit. According to the Assam Education Department, the stated objectives include establishing an appropriate teacher-pupil ratio, optimizing the services of employees, reducing administrative costs, and improving logistical support. As of the latest information published by the department, amalgamation of 701 Middle English (*ME*) schools, 58 Middle Vernacular (*MV*) schools, 324 Lower Primary (*LP*) schools and 2 Junior Basic schools with 836 Secondary schools had received approval with the concurrence of the Finance Department.

The policy, however, is not a completely new development. The legal history of schools amalgamation in Assam goes back well before the present phase of educational restructuring. The Gauhati High Court records show that the state government had issued an office memorandum in 2005 concerning the amalgamation of ME schools with high schools situated within the same campus. Subsequently, the government issued another memorandum in 2014 and introduced the Siksha Khetra scheme through an office memorandum dated 22 September 2016. The scheme sought to bring different categories

of schools functioning independently in the same campus or nearby areas under a common administrative and academic structure.

The policy also generated organized resistance from teachers. The All Assam Middle English Teachers' Association and others challenged the legality and validity of the government's amalgamation decisions before the Gauhati High Court. The litigation illustrates that school amalgamation in Assam has not been merely an administrative exercise but also involved questions of teacher's status, institutional identity, development and service conditions. The petitioners questioned the government's decision to amalgamate different categories of schools and argued against what they described as forcible amalgamation or merger. The government, on the other hand, maintained that amalgamation was intended to ensure optimum utilization of teachers and infrastructure and stated that surplus of staff would be redeployed without financial loss or loss of seniority.

The scale of the issue became visible through data reported in the media in 2024. According to figures attributed to the Assam School Education Department and reported by The Sentinel, the number of elementary schools in Assam declined from 47,818 in 2016 to 39,752 in 2023, a reduction of 8,066 schools. The report stated that 6,335 schools had permanently closed and 1,731 had been merged, comprising 6,032 Lower Primary and 2,023 Upper Primary Schools. During the same period, the number of students in elementary schools was reported to have changed from about 37.40 lakh to approximately 35.05 lakh.

The issue has also entered public and political debate. In 2024, scroll reported criticism that the merger process was effectively resulting in the closure of neighborhood schools, with AASU- association voices stating "in the name of merging, the schools have been closed." Similarly, News Click reported that civil-society groups referred to official figures showing that more than 8,066 elementary schools had either been shut down or merged in Assam during the preceding seven years.

Viewed against the national trend,² the NITI Aayog report, *School Education System in India: Temporal Analysis and Policy Roadmap for Quality Enhancement* (May 2026), records a decline in the number of government schools from about 11.07 Lakh in 2014-15 to 10.13 Lakh in 2024-25 approximately 94,000 fewer government schools. The report links this decline to a combination of school consolidation, demographic change and difficulties in retaining students. Thus, the reduction should not be interpreted as evidence that every missing school was simply "shut down" by administrative order. Researcher from other contexts reinforces the importance of examining accessibility. A major empirical study of rural school closure in China found that while consolidation improve resources, girls exposed to school closure during primary-school years experienced, on average, a 0.60- year reduction in schooling. Similarly, research on school dropout in India has identified distance, poverty, infrastructure, and pupil-teacher ratio as significant determinants of educational participation.

The policy dilemma is therefore not whether resource rationalization is desirable, but whether it can be designed without sacrificing educational equity. The *RTE* framework treats neighborhood accessibility as an important component of the right to elementary education. In a state such as Assam-where floods rivers, erosion, hills and poor road connectivity affect actual travel- the mere existence of another school several kilometers away may not amount to meaningful educational accessibility.

Against this background, the present study examines the closure and amalgamation of government schools in Assam, with particular attention to scale and pattern of school consolidation, the policy rationale, its implications for educational accessibility and equity, and the experiences of teachers and communities. The study argues that the success of schools consolidation should not be measured solely through savings in administrative expenditure or improvements in teacher-pupil ratios; it should also be assessed through indicators of access, retention, attendance, safety, gender equity, community participation and learning outcomes.

The fundamental policy question is thus one of balance: How can Assam rationalize its school system without weakening the neighborhood-school principle and excluding the children who are most dependent on accessible public education? Addressing this requires moving beyond a simple “closure versus no closure” debate towards a framework based on school mapping, social-impact assessment, community consultation, transportation support, and context-specific decision-making.

5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the process of closure and amalgamation of government schools in Assam and to assess its implications for educational accessibility, equity, inclusion, and the effective realization of the right to education.

Specific Objectives

The study seeks to:

1. **Analyze** the scale, pattern, and spatial distribution of government school closure and amalgamation in Assam, with particular reference to the period 2016-2023, and examine the major policy, demography, and administrative factors underlying the process.
2. **Examine** the implications of school closure and amalgamation for educational accessibility, particularly in relation to geographical distance, transportation, infrastructure, enrolment, attendance and retention of students.
3. **Assess** the differential impact of school consolidation on marginalized and vulnerable groups, including children from rural, remote, tribal, tea-garden, riverine, and economically disadvantaged communities, with particular attention to gender, disability and social inclusion.

4. **Evaluate** the extent to which the policy of school closure and amalgamation is consistent with the provisions of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, particularly the principle of neighborhood schooling, as well as the relevant provisions of the National Educational Policy, 2020.
5. **Explore** the perspective and experiences of key stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, community members, teachers' organizations, students' organizations, and civil society groups, regarding the process and consequences of school closure and amalgamation.
6. **Identify** the educational, social, economic, and administrative challenges associated with school consolidation and examine whether the policy has contributed to improved utilization of teachers, infrastructure, and public educational resources.
7. **Explore** alternative and complementary models of educational resource rationalization, including school complexes, cluster-based resource sharing, improved transportation facilities, that can promote efficiency without compromising accessibility and educational equity.
8. **Propose** policy recommendations for a context-specific, child-centered, inclusive, and participatory approach to school rationalization in Assam, balancing administrative efficiency and resource optimization with the constitutional and legal commitment to equitable and accessible education.

4 RESEARCH QUESTION

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What have been the scale, pattern, and geographical distribution of government school closure and amalgamation in Assam during the period 2016-2023?
2. What are the major policy, demographic, administrative, and resource-related factors responsible for the closure and amalgamation of government schools in Assam?
3. How has school closure and amalgamation affected students' access to education in terms of distance, enrolment, retention, and continuity of schooling?
4. What are the different impacts of school consolidation on girls, children with disabilities, and children belonging to rural, tribal, tea-garden, riverine, and economically disadvantaged communities?
5. To what extent is the policy of school closure and amalgamation consistent with the provisions of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, particularly the principle of neighborhood schooling?
6. How do teachers, students, parents, community members, teachers' organizations, students' organizations, and civil society groups perceive the process and consequences of school closure and amalgamation?
7. To what extent has school amalgamation contributed to the efficient utilization of teachers, infrastructure, and financial resources, and what challenges have emerged from the process?

8. What alternative model of school organization can improve administrative and educational efficiency while safeguarding accessibility, inclusion, and educational equity in Assam?
9. What policy measures are necessary to ensure that future decisions concerning school closure or amalgamation are child-centered, evidence-based, geographically appropriate, and participatory

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The closure and amalgamation of government schools has become an important issue in Assam's education policy, particularly in the context of school rationalization, declining enrolment and redistribution of educational resources. The government of Assam states that amalgamation is intended to improve the teacher-pupils ratio, optimize teacher and staff deployment, reduce administrative costs and strengthen the utilization of infrastructure and other resources. The issue is particularly significant because Assam's educational geography differs considerably from that of many others states. The rationale for this study is further strengthened by the changing enrolment pattern. Recent information placed before the Assam Legislative Assembly indicates that enrolment in government and provincialised schools from pre-primary to Class XII declined by 7,35,446 students between 2016-17 and 2025-26. While private-school's enrollment increased by 9, 40,566 during the same period. This raises an important empirical question: whether school amalgamation is primarily a response to declining enrolment or whether the restructuring of the government school network may itself contribute to the gradual shift of students away from government schoolings.

The policy has also become politically and socially contested. Teacher's organizations, student bodies, civil-society groups and political actors have raised concern regarding school closure, accessibility and broader direction of public education policy. Newspaper reports have highlighted criticism that schools are being closed in the name of amalgamation, while the government maintains that consolidation is necessary for better resource utilization. The study is therefore necessary to examine the gap between the administrative rationale of efficiency and the social requirement of accessibility and equity. It seeks to determine who benefits from school consolidation, which bears its cost, and whether the process adequately considers Assam's geographical and socio-economical diversity.

Thus, the significance of the present study lies in moving beyond the numerical count of schools closed or merged to investigate their actual educational and social consequences.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

STUDY	MAIN RELEVANCE TO THE PRESENT STUDY
Dongre & Tewary (2020)	One of the most important empirical studies for India: directly examines school rationalization

	and access.
Palit & Mitra(2014)	Directly examines school rationalization and closure in Rajasthan under RTE
Hannum, Liu, & Wang (2021)	Strong casual evidence on school closure, distance and gender
Hannum & Wang (2022)	Particularly useful for tribal/ minority communities and intersection of gender, poverty and ethnicity
Sinha & Sinha (2022)	Directly about school amalgamation in Assam
Assam PAB Report (2019-20)	Official government evidence that Assam had already amalgamated 5,081 schools
UDISE+ Reports	Essential for school numbers enrolment, teachers and infrastructure
NITI Aayog (2026)	Latest national evidence on decline in government schools and school consideration
NEP 2020	Policy foundation for school complexes and resource sharing
RTE Act/ Rules	Legal framework for neighborhood schooling and accessibility

RESEARCH GAP

The review of existing literature indicates that school consolidation has been examined from the perspectives of administrative efficiency, resource utilization, educational quality, accessibility and social equity. Four important gaps remain. First, empirical studies specifically examining school closure and amalgamation in Assam are limited, despite the substantial scale of school restricting in the state. Second, existing discussions tend to amalgamation or describe stakeholder concerns, while systematic analysis of its effects on distance, accessibility, enrolment, retention and dropout remains inadequate. Third, insufficient attention has been given to the intersectional effects of school consolidation on girls, tribal communities, tea-garden populations, children with disabilities and economically disadvantaged households living in geographically difficult areas. Fourth, the relationship between school amalgamation, the Right to Education framework, *NEP 2020*, and the political and social contestation surrounding public-school restructuring in Assam has not been adequately examined.

The present study sees to address these gaps by combining government and *UDISE+* data with policy documents, legal materials, media report and stakeholder perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine the process of closure and amalgamation of government schools in Assam and its implication for educational accessibility, equity, and inclusion. A mixed-methods approach is appropriate because the research questions

involve both quantitative aspects such as scale, pattern, enrolment, and dropout, and qualitative aspects such as stakeholder experiences, policy interpretation, and social consequences.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

The findings are discussed in relation to the objectives and research questions of the study drawing upon *UDISE+* data, governments, Legal records, media reports, and stakeholder perspectives.

1. Scale, Pattern and Rationale of School Closure and Amalgamation.

The study finds that between 2016 and 2023, 8,066 elementary schools in Assam were reported to have either closed or been merged, comprising 6,335 closures and 1,731 mergers. Lower primary schools accounted for 6,032 of these units. The restructuring was primarily associated with low enrolment, teacher rationalization, infrastructure utilization and administrative efficiency. Thus, school amalgamation was presented principally as a resource-rationalization measure rather than simply a school-closure programme.

2. Accessibility, Distance and Student Participation

The evidence indicates that amalgamation can increase the distance between children's homes and their schools, particularly in rural, riverine, char, hilly and remote areas. Increased travel distance may involve additional transportation costs, unsafe routes and longer travelling time. These effects are particularly important for elementary-school children. Therefore, the availability of an alternative school cannot be assessed only by its existence, actual accessibility must also be considered.

3. Impact on vulnerable Groups

The effects of school consolidation are not evenly distributed. Girls, children's with special needs, tribal and tea-garden communities, and children from economically disadvantaged households are likely to face greater barriers when schools are located farther from their habitations. The evidence therefore suggests that a uniform consolidation policy may deepen existing geographical and socio-economic inequalities unless accompanied by transport, safety and accessibility measures.

4. RTE 2009 and NEP 2020

The findings reveal a policy tension between administrative efficiency and the principle of neighborhood schooling. The RTE framework emphasizes accessibility to elementary education, while NEP 2020 promotes school complexes and resource sharing to improve efficiency and educational quality. However, school complexes and resource sharing do not necessarily require the physical closure of every small or low-enrolment school. In Assam, the relevance of the *RTE* accessibility principle becomes greater because of floods, rivers, difficult terrain and inadequate transport facilities.

5. Stakeholder and Public Responses

The amalgamation policy has generated resistance from teacher's organizations, student bodies and civil-society groups. Concerns have focused on increased travel

distance development, workload, institutional identity and the perceived loss of neighborhood schools. The issue has consequently become a matter of public and political contestation, demonstrating that school restructuring is not merely an administrative decision but also a question of community participation and public accountability.

6. Efficiency and Resource Utilization

Amalgamation can improve the utilization of teachers, infrastructure and administrative resources where schools are located close to each other and receiving institutions have adequate capacity. However, consolidation may create overcrowding, increased teacher workload and infrastructure pressure where adequate preparation is absent. Therefore, the efficiency benefits of amalgamation depend substantially on proper school mapping, infrastructure capacity and teacher planning.

7. Alternative Approaches

The findings indicate that Assam may benefit from a resource-sharing model without unnecessary physical closure of neighborhood schools. School complexes, shared specialist teachers, digital and mobile educational support, safe transportation, residential facilities in exceptionally remote areas and cluster-level infrastructure can provide alternatives to complete school closure.

OVERALL INTERPRETATION

The study indicates that school amalgamation can address genuine administrative and resource-utilization problems, but its educational consequences depend on location, distance, infrastructure and the socio-economic characteristics of affected communities. In Assam, therefore, the success of school rationalization should not be measured only through the number of schools merged, financial savings or teacher-pupil ratios; it should also be assessed through accessibility, enrolment, retention, safety, inclusion and learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

School amalgamation in Assam represents a complex policy trade-off between efficiency and equity. While consolidation may improve resource utilization in some locations, indiscriminate closure or merger can create additional barriers for children in geographically and socio-economically disadvantaged areas. A context-specific, evidence-based and participatory approach, supported by adequate transport, infrastructure and community consultation, is therefore essential for ensuring that rationalization strengthens rather than weakens public education in Assam.

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