

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and Higher Education: Accessibility and Social Inclusion in Assam

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Abstract:

The present study is designed to understand the role of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in fostering Accessibility and Social Inclusion for Higher Education in Assam with a specific focus on SDG 4. The present study aims to understand the role of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in making Higher Education accessible and inclusive in Assam, specifically SDG 4. Education is seen as one of the most powerful tools for sustainable development, social change and empowerment of people (United Nations, 2015). The study is set to examine the accessibility to higher education, social inclusion status of marginalized communities and the challenges and opportunities in relation to inclusive and sustainable higher education system in Assam. This research is descriptive and analytical and secondary data is collected from the various journal articles, government reports, AISHE reports, UNESCO publications, policy documents and other academic sources. The results show that substantial progress has been achieved in broaden access to higher education establishments, enhancing female participation and introducing welfare measures for having disadvantaged groups. But economic disparities, lack of infrastructure, geographical isolation, digital divide and underrepresentation of marginalised groups still pose obstacles to equitable access to higher education. The study also reveals that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, digital education and education reforms based on the concept of sustainability can create more opportunities for inclusive development of higher education in Assam. Therefore, the paper argues that coordinated policy interventions and infrastructural investment, along with socially inclusive educational practices, is necessary to realize the SDG4 goals and to provide sustainable higher education for all groups of society.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Higher Education, Accessibility, Social Inclusion, Assam, SDG 4, Educational Equity

1. Introduction and Theoretical Background:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a comprehensive programme for global development and are grounded in human welfare, equality and sustainability. Goal 4 of the 17 SDGs is dedicated to ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015). Education is accepted as a tool of social change, empowerment and economic development. In particular, higher education makes significant contributions to innovation, employability, democratic participation and nation building.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a significant growth in higher education in Assam. In many districts, the education has been made more accessible with the establishment of new universities, government colleges, private institutions and professional institutes. But the unequal access to education and social inclusion still exists due to factors like regional disparities, poverty, digital exclusion, gender inequality and poor infrastructure.

Theoretically, the Human Capital Theory focuses on the importance of education as a productive investment to enhance social development (Becker, 1993). Again, the Social Inclusion Theory emphasizes the need to include all social groups in educational opportunities and institutional structures equally. The Capability Approach initiated by Amartya Sen, also holds that education increases the freedom and capacities of individuals, which helps to bring about sustainable human development (Sen, 1999).

1.1 Definition of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

The Sustainable Development Goals are a collection of 17 goals that form the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” adopted by the United Nations in 2015. Sustainable and inclusive development strategies are designed to solve large-scale problems, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, justice, health and quality education, (United Nations, 2015). The aims are universal and common to all rich and poor nations. SDG 4 is one of 17 SDGs, which targets inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. The SDGs are all about equitable development, with a focus on sustainable, social and economic growth. They are a blueprint for action for governments, institutions and societies to take a coordinated action towards a more equitable, sustainable and prosperous future for current and future generations.

1.2 Higher Education in Assam:

Higher education in Assam is important for social development, human resource development and development of Northeast India. Higher education system of Assam consists of universities, government colleges, private colleges, technical institutions, professional institutions and research centres with undergraduate, post graduate, diploma and doctoral courses. The state has seen that higher education institutions have been expanding over the years, with the establishment of universities like Gauhati University, Dibrugarh University, Assam University, Bhattadev University etc. along with other government initiatives, the provision of scholarships and educational reforms, which have helped to enhance the enrolment and provision of education to various social groups. While this is the case, the situation of higher education in Assam is still marked with some problems like infrastructural deficiencies, disparities, digital divide, scarcity of skilled teachers and research facilities. In spite of these difficulties, higher education is still playing an important role in inclusive growth and sustainable development in the state.

2. Review of Literature:

Bautista-Puig et al. (2021) *Unveiling the Research Landscape of Sustainable Development Goals and their Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions and Research Centers: Major Trends in 2000–2017*. The study analysis is to understand the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) and research centers in research on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the globe. Between 2000 and 2017, 25,299 publications on SDGs and MDGs were studied. This has shown that there is significant growth in research on SDGs, and that HEIs are key players in sustainability research. The authors were able to identify some key thematic areas related to the various SDGs and emphasized the increasing contribution of universities in creating knowledge for sustainable development. The researchers found that universities and universities of technology can play an important role in the advancement of sustainability by conducting research, innovation and interdisciplinary cooperation.

Tilbury (2011) *Higher Education for Sustainability: A Global Overview of Commitment and Progress*. The investigators studied the international initiatives of higher education institutions for embedding sustainability in education, research, governance and community. The study included an inspection of international declarations, institutional commitments and sustainability programmes of universities around the world. Results showed that universities are becoming more aware of sustainability as a strategic priority, but there is a lack of uniformity across regions and institutions. The author highlighted the importance of transformative education, interdisciplinary teaching, and institutional change through participatory education. The study found that institutions of higher education can play a key role in achieving sustainable society change by fostering the sustainable principles in academic and administrative activities.

UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021) *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. In the context of equity, inclusion and sustainable development, the UNESCO International Commission (2021) discussed the future of education. The report highlighted that education should feel like a public good and be part of a social justice and democratic culture. The results pointed to the continued disparities between access to education in different regions, social and economic groups. The report called for inclusive education systems with opportunities for lifelong learning and digital accessibility. It also emphasized the need for partnerships between governments, educational institutions, and communities for SDG 4 implementation. The report recommended that education is the key driver for establishing sustainable and resilient societies for solving the modern global issues.

Sen (1999) *Development as Freedom*. The researcher introduced the concept of the Capability Approach that sees development as an increase in people's freedoms and opportunities. The author believed that education was a basic skill which could empower people to function in social, economic and political life. The research revealed that deprivation in education will hinder human development and social inclusion. Improved access to quality education fosters individual agency, reduces inequality and improves overall developmental outcomes, Sen said. The results indicate that the main thrust of educational policy needs to be on participation, empowerment, as well as enrolment. The work offers a robust theoretical framework for the analysis of the issues of accessibility and social inclusion in higher education.

Ministry of Education, Government of India (2020), *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*. In response to the need for comprehensive reforms to enhance the accessibility and quality of education, the National Education Policy (2020) was put forth. The policy highlighted the issues of equity in education, higher Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), multi-disciplinary education, digital education, and institutional

autonomy. It emphasized the need for providing opportunities to marginalized and underrepresented communities through financial aid, scholarships, and inclusive educational practices. There was also a policy stance of expansion of higher education institutions in under-served areas. The results indicate that the NEP 2020 offers a promising template for India's higher education system to meet higher education goals of SDG 4 which focus on equity, quality, and lifelong learning.

All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report (2022). *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21*. The Report makes available detailed statistics on higher education in India. The report noted country-wide progress on Gross Enrolment Ratio, the participation of girls and growth of institutions. Results showed that there was a gradual rise in enrolment in higher education for females and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. But there were regional, rural-urban and socio-economic variations. Issues of infrastructure, shortage of faculty and quality assurance were also pointed out. The report highlighted the positive strides made in educational participation for states like Assam, but also identified the persistent gaps in higher education access and inclusion that need to be tackled.

Alharthi and Spichkova (2017) *Individual and Social Requirement Aspects of Sustainable eLearning Systems*. The researcher analysed the role of sustainable e-learning systems in the promotion of educational accessibility and social inclusion. This study focused on examining the support of digital learning environments to educational equity for the diverse learner groups. The results showed that e-learning platforms can have a positive impact on the flexibility, access, and participation of learners, especially in the case of learners with geographical, economic, and physical barriers. The study also revealed some obstacles that include technological infrastructure, digital literacy and resources. The authors found that, with the right technological and institutional infrastructure, sustainable e-learning systems can play a significant role in promoting educational equity and inclusion. The present study has significant relevance for the study of digital teaching and learning problems in remote and rural areas like Assam.

3. Research Objectives:

- i. To examine the role of Sustainable Development Goals in promoting accessibility in higher education in Assam
- ii. To analyze the status of social inclusion in higher education among marginalized communities in Assam.
- iii. To identify the challenges and opportunities for achieving inclusive and sustainable higher education in Assam.

4. Research Methodology:

This study is descriptive and analytical in nature and it is of secondary data type. Relevant information has been gathered from books, journal articles, government reports, census reports, AISHE reports, UNESCO documents, UGC publications, online academic database and NEP 2020. The collected data was analysed in qualitative manner to understand the linkage between SDGs and access to higher education and social inclusion in Assam. The study uses a thematic approach in analyzing the issues of education accessibility, gender inclusion, infrastructural gap, digital gap, and policy response. The method adopted was secondary data analysis, as it enabled to gain a wider understanding of the policy trend, institutional development and education conditions for the region of Assam.

5. Discussion and Results:

The discussion and findings part of the study gives elaborate analysis of the results which were obtained based on the objectives set for the research. The analysis has been conducted from the secondary data which has been collected from the government report, journal articles, policy document, AISHE reports, UNESCO publications and other relevant academic sources. This section critically dwells on the role of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially SDG4 for making higher education accessible and inclusive in the context of Assam. It also analyzes the present educational context, marginalized groups' access to education, development of infrastructure, digital accessibility, and policy measures concerning higher education in the state. The results indicate that though there is significant work done in enhancing the educational opportunities and improving enrolments, there are still socio-economic, geographical and infrastructural constraints which are affecting inclusive and sustainable development of higher education in Assam.

5.1 Role of SDGs in Promoting Accessibility in Higher Education in Assam:

Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4) is a priority in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations (2015). With respect to the state of Assam, SDG-oriented education policies have had great impact on higher education expansion and access. Accessibility in higher education means that learners from various socio-economic, geographical and cultural backgrounds can have equal opportunities in accessing higher education for admission, participation and completion. As a geographically varied with social-cultural diversity state Assam has seen both achievement and problems in making education accessible in accordance with SD goals.

Expansion of educational institutions in rural and underserved areas is one of the significant contributions of SDGs to boost accessibility to higher education in Assam. In the past 20 years, the Government of Assam and Government of India have introduced various Government colleges, Model degree colleges and Universities to enhance the educational outreach among the region. The Bhattadev University, Bodoland University and government model colleges have improved the prospects for students from the remote districts and marginalised communities. Equitable access to higher education via institutional expansion, multidisciplinary learning and digital inclusion is also one of the key aspects of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Government of India, 2020).

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education in Assam has experienced a gradual improvement in the past few years. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE, 2022) has found that it has been seen that there is a significant improvement in the participation of women in higher education with the implementation of government scholarship programmes, free admission programmes, bicycle distribution programmes and hostel facilities. Economically weaker students have especially benefited from such schemes as fee waiver and Pragyan Bharati to continue with higher studies. The actions are an example of SDG 4 being realised in terms of enhancing the participation of disadvantaged groups in education.

Furthermore, SDGs have fostered education policies which have emphasized social equity and inclusion. Reform in reservation policies has led to better access to higher education for marginalized communities of minorities, OBCs, S. Tribes (STs) and S. Castes (SCs). Accessibility has also been pursued in the field of education via distance learning and digital learning platforms, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, online learning systems were introduced and provided some

alternative learning opportunities to many of the students who could not go to the higher education institution physically (Saikia & Goswami, 2021).

Though there is progress, there are several factors that still hinder the accessibility of higher education in Assam. Geographical isolation, vulnerable to floods, woefully low transportation, poverty and digital inequality are significant challenges. Access to the colleges/universities for students from char areas, tea garden areas and tribal areas are sometimes hindered due to infrastructural limitations. Inequalities also became evident during online education, as a large number of rural students did not have smartphones and electricity facilities, and they did not have a connection to the internet. UNESCO (2021) highlighted the importance of equal participation and learning opportunities for all social groups in the context of educational accessibility, not just enrolment.

Thus, the contribution of SDGs towards accessibility in the context of higher education in Assam is significant in the development of policy, expansion of institutions and inclusive education. To realize the goals of sustainable and equitable higher education, however, there is a need for ongoing investment in infrastructure, digital connection, financial support and implementation of inclusive policies that ensure no one is left behind on the educational development journey.

5.2 Status of Social Inclusion in Higher Education among Marginalized Communities in Assam:

Social Inclusion in Higher Education is the process of providing equal access, participation, representation and opportunities to all sections of society without discrimination on the basis of caste, tribe, gender, religion, disability, economic status and geographical location. The socio-cultural diversity and regional inequalities in Assam are making social inclusion a major policy concern in higher education. There are various marginalised communities in Assam such as Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), tea tribes, minorities, economically weaker section, and people living in remote areas and flood prone areas. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general and SDG 4 in particular have greatly shaped the policy agendas for higher education for equity and inclusion in the state.

The Assam education system has seen improvement in the number of enrolments and growth of institutions in recent years. Reservation policies, scholarships, free admission and hostel facilities provided by the Government have played a positive role in bringing the needy group into the mainstream of higher education. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE, 2022) reveals that the enrolment of female students and students belonging to backward sections of the society in colleges and universities in Assam has been slowly on the rise. Special scholarship programmes for the Scheduled Tribes, the Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and minorities have been a major catalyst in increasing the participation of economically weaker sections in education.

The Government of Assam has also set up the government model colleges in the backward and remote areas to enhance educational accessibility. Higher education institutions like Bhattadev University and other provincialized colleges have increased higher education opportunities in districts that previously had limited opportunities. The institutional developments are related to the overall SDG 4 ambitions for equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). Moreover, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been focused on inclusive education, gender parity, and support for the socially and economically weaker sections of society through policy interventions and financial support (Government of India, 2020). The contribution of women to the education sector has also enhanced considerably over the years in Assam. More female students are entering into higher studies as a result of awareness programmes, financial support schemes and social changes. Female enrolment is higher than male in several institutions,

especially in arts and humanities related disciplines. But there are still gender gaps in the professional and technical education sector, where females are a comparatively small minority. Moreover, women's higher education is still hindered by early marriage, poverty, and family duties in rural regions.

In spite of these developments, there are still certain impediments towards effective social inclusion of the marginalised communities in Assam in the context of higher education. Economic disparities are still a significant issue. However, students from the tea garden communities, char areas, tribal belts and villages located in remote areas more often suffer financial constraints regarding their education. Due to household responsibilities, unemployment and poor financial support, many students are forced to drop out of higher education. Differences in regions and poverty have a profound impact on educational participation in rural Assam, according to Borah (2019).

Educational exclusion is further exacerbated by geographical isolation and infrastructural shortcomings. Access to digital learning facilities, internet, and libraries is limited in areas susceptible to flooding and in remote regions. In areas susceptible to flooding and in remote regions, there is a lack of proper transportation, internet, and libraries. The digital divide was brought to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which students from marginalized communities faced challenges in accessing online classes and electricity facilities, as well as having no smartphones (Saikia & Goswami, 2021). The learning outcomes were affected by this digital exclusion and the training inequalities were exacerbated.

The students with disability also encounter several hurdles to access higher education institutes in Assam. There are a number of colleges that do not have ramps, assistive technologies, inclusive classrooms and disability-friendly infrastructure. However, social stigma and lack of awareness on inclusive education continue to marginalize differently-abled students to exclude them from academic activities. UNESCO (2021) stated that inclusive education should give equal access, dignity and learning opportunities for all learners regardless of their physical or social status.

Students from tribal and minority communities are also impacted by language and cultural barriers. The individuals who are first generation learners often experience adjustment issues in higher education institutions because of the language, curriculum, and socio-cultural differences. Lack of academic support, poor counselling and lack of inclusive institutional practices can cause student dropouts and low retention rates.

While the Assam government has taken major initiatives towards social inclusion in higher education through policies, scholarships, reservation, and expansion of institutions, structural inequalities still remain. To make higher education more sustainable and inclusive, policies, infrastructures, digital inclusion and tailoring education for social needs must be pursued continuously to create equal opportunities for learning to all sections of society.

5.3 Challenges for achieving Inclusive and Sustainable Higher Education in Assam:

While there are several policy developments and institutional efforts towards inclusive and sustainable higher education, achieving inclusive and sustainable higher education in Assam continues to be one of the greatest challenges. The socio-economic, geographical, infrastructural and technological challenges in Assam higher education system still exist which affect equal educational opportunities for every section of the society. These challenges have a direct impact on the accessibility of education, social inclusion of marginalised and disadvantaged groups and quality of learning outcomes.

Major Challenges:

- i. **Regional and Infrastructural Disparities:** In many parts of the state of Assam, still there is a lack of higher education institution, library, laboratory, hostels, transportation and ICT facilities in rural and remote areas. Flood zone and char areas students have significant problems accessing colleges/universities regularly.
- ii. **Economic Inequality and Poverty:** If a student comes from a poor family, tea garden, tribal community, minority section, he/she faces difficulty in pursuing higher education because of financial problems. The rates of dropout and educational participation are reduced by poverty.
- iii. **Digital Divide and Technological Exclusion:** COVID-19 pandemic revealed grossly unequal digital scenario in Assam. The lack of smart phones, internet, electricity and digital literacy among many students adversely impacted online learning participation (Saikia & Goswami, 2021).
- iv. **Faculty Shortage and Contractualization of appointments:** There are few colleges in Assam where there is scarcity of qualified faculty and contractualization of appointments. There is also inadequacy in research infrastructure in the colleges. This impacts on the quality of learning, academic growth and sustainability of institutions.
- v. **Gender and Social Barriers:** Although the numbers of females enrolled have improved, there are still a lot of challenges for girls in rural areas, including family responsibilities, early marriage, and socio-cultural barriers. There is also discrimination and lack of academic support for students from marginalised communities.
- vi. **Limited Inclusion of Students with Disabilities:** Most higher education institutions have limited infrastructure, assistive technologies and inclusive teaching practices for differently abled students, thereby limiting their access to equal teaching learning opportunities.
- vii. **Environmental and Geographical Vulnerabilities:** Frequent floods, erosion and natural disaster in many districts of the State of Assam create academic disruption and adversely impact continuity in education and functioning of institutions.

5.4 Opportunities for achieving Inclusive and Sustainable Higher Education in Assam:

Assam has good potential in terms of policy reforms, digital expansion, institutional growth and community involvement to build an inclusive and sustainable higher education system despite the challenges faced. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offer robust solutions to enhance educational access, equity, and quality in the state. These opportunities could add significantly to the process of attaining social inclusion and sustainable educational development in Assam.

Major Opportunities:

- i. **The National Education Policy 2020** focuses on four key areas: Multidisciplinary learning, Equitable access, Digital education, and Institutional autonomy. Its effective implementation can be helpful to enhance educational inclusiveness and quality in Assam.
- ii. **Growth of Digital Education and ICT Infrastructure:** The development of digital education and ICT infrastructure provide opportunities for students in remote areas to gain access to higher education. Educational inequality can be alleviated through the improvement of Internet connectivity and digital literacy.

- iii. Institutional Expansion in Rural Areas: Government model colleges, universities and skill-based institutes have been established in the rural and backward areas of the district and increased education facilities for the marginal groups.
- iv. Government Scholarship and Welfare Schemes: Schemes for the economically weaker students such as SC, ST, OBC, minority and female students are very significant in providing scholarship programmes, waiver of fee and hostel facilities etc.
- v. Rise in enrolment of female students in higher education institutions: It is a positive sign of social changes and is an opportunity for Assam to have an inclusive educational development.
- vi. Opportunity for Sustainability-oriented Research: Assam is rich in biodiversity, indigenous culture and environmental issues, offering great scope for the implementation of research work in the field of climate change, disaster management, indigenous knowledge, sustainable development and so on in the higher education institutions.
- vii. Community Participation and Local Collaboration: Partnerships between educational institutions, communities, NGOs and government agencies can enhance inclusive educational practice and community-based learning.
- viii. Skill Development and Employability Programmes: Skill development programmes, entrepreneurship and skill development training linked to SDGs can enhance employability and economic empowerment of the youth in Assam.

Finally, ensuring inclusive and sustainable higher education in Assam demands a well-balanced strategy to counterbalance the current socio-economic, infrastructural, and digital hurdles while leveraging the opportunities brought forth by SDGs and NEP 2020. While there has been a lot of progress in terms of increasing accessibility and social inclusion of education in Assam, there are significant disparities observed in marginalised communities. Improving institutional infrastructure, digital connectivity, financial support system, and inclusive learning practices can play a significant role in realizing SDG 4 in ensuring inclusive and equitable access to higher education in Assam for various sections of society.

6. Suggestions and Recommendations:

An inclusive and sustainable higher education in Assam requires a comprehensive and policy-oriented approach. The government and the higher educational institutions should emphasize on infrastructural development of the rural and remote area by setting up well-equipped colleges, libraries, laboratories, hostels and transportation facilities. Increasing educational infrastructure quality can greatly reduce the gap in education between different countries and make it more available for those who are less privileged in the system.

Internet connectivity, smart classrooms, and digital devices for economically weaker students should be extended to enhance digital inclusion. Students from flood prone, char and tribal areas, where digital and infrastructural exclusion are high, should receive special attention. To increase online learning participation, capacity-building programmes for digital literacy should also be introduced.

There should be expansion of financial assistance schemes, scholarships, fee waivers and educational loans for the students of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), OBCs, Minority communities, differently abled and Women. Counselling and mentoring systems for first-generation learners and socially disadvantaged groups should be set up within the institutions.

One-way higher education institutions can foster inclusive campus environments is to make sure that there is disability-friendly infrastructure, gender sensitive policies and culturally-inclusive teaching methods. The recruitment of qualified faculty members, as well as enhancing the research facilities, are also important for quality and sustainability of education.

Further, the National Education Policy 2020 should be fast tracked with emphasis on multidisciplinary education, skill development, vocational education and employability. There is need to promote research in relation to climate change, indigenous knowledge, disaster management, and sustainable development in the context of Assam's region in the university and colleges.

Last but not least, the coordination between the various government institutions, local communities, NGOs and educational institutions is required for effective implementation of the policy and realizing the goals of SDG 4 in a manner that is equitable, inclusive and accessible for the educational institutions of Assam.

7. Major Findings:

It came out from the study that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4, have had a profound impact on the formulation of higher education policies on accessibility and social inclusion in the state of Assam. The results suggest that the growth of Universities, Government Colleges and Model Educational Institutions has enhanced the access to Higher education in different parts of the State. Government schemes like scholarship schemes, waiving fees, providing hostel facilities and reservation policies have positively helped to improve the participation of the marginalized and economically weaker communities.

The study also revealed that the female population has significantly increased in their enrolment in Higher Education in recent years, which indicates slow progress towards gender inclusion. But there are inequalities between pupils from rural areas, tea garden communities, tribal groups, minority groups and pupils in flood prone areas. Infrastructural limitations, geographical isolation and economic difficulties continue as significant challenges to educational continuity and equal participation.

The study also reveals that there is a huge digital divide in Assam. COVID-19 highlighted disparities in access to smartphones, internet, electricity, digital learning tools, and especially among students in rural and marginalized communities. The study also revealed that the shortage of qualified faculty members, inadequate research facilities and lack of disability friendly infrastructure are the major challenges faced in the educational quality and inclusiveness.

In the process the study concluded that there are significant opportunities in Assam to make higher education a sustainable reality through effective implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, digital education, skill development programmes and research for sustainability. The results highlight the need for multi-faceted policies, infrastructure investments, digital inclusion, and community involvement in equal and equitable access to higher education in Assam, consistent with SDG 4.

8. Conclusion:

The current study analysed how Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and particularly SDG 4, contribute to making higher education accessible and inclusive to people in Assam. The results of the study show that the higher education system in Assam has made significant improvements, including through

the development of a number of institutions, government welfare packages, a rise in the enrolment of women and the introduction of policies for inclusive educational development. The opportunities are provided under the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and various state-level initiatives in education to make the education accessible to marginalised and economically weaker communities (Government of India, 2020).

But the research also found that a number of structural problems remain that are impeding inclusive and sustainable higher education in the state. Economic inequalities, weaknesses in infrastructure, digital divide, geographical isolation, environmental vulnerability and restricted support for marginalised populations remain a serious issue in terms of access and continuity in the educational system. Although the tribal community, tea garden areas, char regions and rural areas continue to experience multiple disadvantages in their educational outcomes (Borah, 2019).

The study also highlights the importance of having equitable access, good quality learning spaces, digital inclusion and socially inclusive learning practices for sustainable higher education, which cannot be realized exclusively by expanding the institutions. The aim of SDG 4 is to leave no learner behind because of socio-economic, geographical, gender, physical or other barriers and, as such, educational policies must ensure that no learner is left behind. Hence, concerted action by various government departments, educational institutes, local communities, and policy makers is needed to improve inclusive higher education and to ensure sustainable development in the educational sector of Assam.

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