Chapter 4

Higher Education in Assam: History, Issues and Challenges

4.1 Introduction

Assam being one of the North Eastern states, occupies a unique cultural space in the Indian sub continent, with unique cultural practices, values and way of life. Enrichment of Assamese culture and modernisation of Assamese nationality were greatly an outcome of modern education that developed in the state, along with simultaneous contribution of the English language. In course of time, Assam has come to earn the position of an educational destination of repute, both inside and outside the state. The state has witnessed many new developments in terms of policies and programmes for further enhancement of the educational scenario of Assam.

The present chapter deals with the trajectory of higher education in the state of Assam. While it briefly traces the history of education in Assam in general, the chapter particularly attempts to outline the course of higher education in the state. An attempt is made to locate the shift in the higher education sector of the state which brought significant changes in the nature of higher education, especially the phenomenon of privatisation. Historical and exploratory in nature, this chapter serves as a prelude to the following Fifth Chapter which primarily deals with the manifestations of the change that occurred in the higher education sector of the state.

4.2 Assam and Modern Education: A Historical Background

Assam witnessed the development of modern education in the state with the coming up of British reign in the state in 1826. Before the coming up of the British, for a long time,
education had been imparted in the indigenous way. Indigenous formal institutions were engaged in the process of imparting education to the masses. While Hindus received education from Pathsalas, Tols imparted education to Brahmins and upper class Hindu. Madrassas were engaged in imparting education to the Muslims and Satras were engaged in educating the Vaisnavites (Rahman, 2012).

Debi (1897:1-2) notes that modern education system under the patronage of the British came to replace these indigenous systems of imparting education to the masses. As British rule expanded, all over India knowledge of the English language received great prominence and became necessary for administrative and commercial purposes. It was after the Charter Act of 1833 that education in Assam received serious and active attention and involvement of both the government and missionaries; prior to that there was no perceptible noticeable advancement in the educational sector of the state (Rahman, 2012).

Modern education progressed and developed mainly under the patronage of the British. W. Robinson, the first inspector of schools of Brahmaputra valley in his report mentioned that the indigenous system of education that was in prevalence in the valley was in an appalling state. British govt adopted various initiatives to open schools imparting modern education. Because of efforts and attempts of govt. and other agencies many new schools got started in the valley and the number increased to 1,293 by 1875 with an enrolment of 31,462.

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6 See https://directorateofhighereducation.assam.gov.in

7 ibid
4.3 Development of Education in Assam under the Aegis of the British

In the process of developing modern education in the state, a debate and controversy arose between oriental and anglicised form of learning. Amidst the controversy, the agent of governor general of eastern frontier, David Scott made arguments in favour of encouraging indigenous form of learning and thereby promoting oriental learning. In course of time however, English language and education came be realised as vital for administrative convenience and for overall development. There were urgent needs as well as suggestions to establish institutions to impart English education. Gauhati Jila school was opened as a result of the appeal of the then commissioner of Assam Mr. Jenkins to establish English school (Rahman, 2012). This happened to be the pioneering step towards the developed modern education in the state. It heralded the future course of modern institutions in Assam like the Cotton College, the Jorhat Normal School and the Department of Mohammedan Education et al. Macaulay’s downward filtration theory, who was the president of the committee of public instruction, set the tone for significant British initiatives in the sphere of education (ibid).

4.4 Higher Education in Assam in the Post-independence Period

The independent India greatly realized the importance of a good efficient educational system for the much sought development of the country. One of the chief concerns of the government both at the centre and at the states was to build an educational system to steer the process of national progression, and accordingly various initiatives were adopted leading to rapid wide expansion of education in the country. Various commissions and committees reviewed and recommended reformation in the existing educational system. The later part of the 19th century saw the adoption of the National Policy on Education, 1986 regarding governance of education in the country.
The government of Assam follows the national policies and mandates in matters of intervention in education. It has been following the National Policy of Education, 1986 and the Programme of Action 1986 as implemented in 1992 in its endeavour towards requirement, expansion and improvement of higher education in the state. Along with, UGC and NAAC are the two significant agencies involved in the process of ensuring and promoting the status and quality of higher education.

For proper administration and governance of the education sector in the state, the office of Director of public instruction (DPI) was created in 1874. Situated at Shillong, the then capital of undivided Assam, the office of DPI looked after the educational aspects of the entire region that consisted of present day Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram permeating elementary, secondary, higher, technical and adult education. The office shifted to Guwahati in 1973 with the shift of the capital of Assam\(^8\).

Higher education is the stage of education after secondary education. India followed a uniform pattern of higher education in the pre independence period. A two years course in Arts and Science stream constituted the undergraduate Degree. This was followed by a two years course for a Post Graduate degree. With the implementation of the new pattern, undergraduate degree course consists of three years for general education and four or five years for professional education. India today boasts of a large and expanded system of higher education. The contribution of higher education towards democratic, economic and social development of India can never be denied or underestimated.

Till 1900 A.D. higher education in Assam lagged behind. Gauhati School got affiliated to Calcutta University at the level of entrance. In 1861 two students cleared the entrance

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\(^8\) See https://directorateofhighereducation.assam.gov.in
examination. Inspector of schools Mr. Murray proposed the upgradation of Gauhati school to FA course to cater to the educational needs of the natives of the state. In 1865 the government of India ordered the upgradation, and in 1866 Gauhati School got promoted to a collegiate school to educate native people and make them suitable for administrative offices and responsibilities. However, with the constitution of a chief commissioner’s province, Assam got separated from Bengal. And the first chief commissioner of Assam Colonel Keatings ordered abolition of the collegiate section of Gauhati School due to poor performance, high cost of education and poor enrolment of students.

All the aspiring students had to move to Calcutta for higher education. Realising the inconvenience and difficulty of students to go and acquire higher education, the public continued to appeal to the government to re introduce collegiate section in Gauhati School. Sir Charles Elliot, the chief commissioner of Assam dealt with the demands sympathetically and decided to award Rs 20 scholarship to all the students who went for FA and BA courses to college in Calcutta. He also assured to re introduce collegiate section in Gauhati School in conditions of satisfactory results (Neog, 2009, p.24). In 1887 the then chief commissioner of Assam William ward decreased the number of students to be awarded scholarship and this disappointed the Assamese community. They then started strongly agitating for a college in Assam (ibid).

History of higher education in Assam, from the very beginning, was marked by indolence. Though Assam came under British rule way back in 1828, the state did not witness a college of its own till the turn to the century. Even the development of elementary and secondary education was very much sporadic in nature. After the establishment of colonial rule, Mr. Scott, an agent of East India Company established a
few Bengali medium schools to cater to the interests of the native people. Gowhattty
High School was established in 1835, that is, within 8 years of British rule. However the
second high school was established only in 1841 only. By starts and fits, Assam had six
high schools by 1874. By then Assam had a Director of Public Instruction. By that time,
the native people of the state also felt the need for and raised the demand of a college.
With an aim to appease such clamour, Gowhattty High School was attached with First
Arts Classes in 1866, and later in 1875, a sort of two Law classes were opened.
However these college sanctions died down the very next year. It was debated that
Guwahati can never see the rise of satisfactory higher education institutions. With a
stipend of twenty rupees for each boy, it was believed that, the better option was to send
aspirants of higher education to Calcutta. This argument followed into action and
students were encouraged to pass the Entrance Examination and to proceed to Calcutta
for higher education by steamships. It was then that the old demand for a local college
to cater to the aspirants of higher education came to the surface. Manik Chandra Baruah,
the public spirited man, who received his college education from Gowhattty School led
the agitation in demand of local college. Baruah submitted a petition to the government
in 1899 demanding the establishment of a college in Guwahati. The petition also
mentioned that if government fails to heed to the demand, the amount and number of
stipends should be favourably increased. The greater stress was on establishing a
college in Guwahati. The Chief Commissioner of the province during that time
happened to be Sir Henry Cotton, who was known to be large and kind hearted person
(maha-mati), and he reciprocated the demand with greatest kindness. The people of
Guwahati appealed that the name of the new college to be coming into existence should
be named after the kind Chief Commissioner. The college christened as Cotton College
came into being on May 27, 1901 with 37 names in First year rolls and 2 in the second year. At the beginning there were no bright prospects for the college and Damocles’ sword was hung upon by authorities. But it began to develop and enhance itself briskly. Intermediate arts classes in place of old FA, BA and B.Sc, pass and honours and MA classes in English in 1914 started functioning properly. Cotton College, thus, in the course of time established itself as a full fledged institution. Gradually a number of other colleges were established, namely, Earl Law college (1915), Jorhat college (1962), the Brindabun college, Edmund's college and the St Anthony college (Neog, 2009). These institutions significantly contributed towards development of higher education in Assam.

4.5 Development of the University System

The maiden enunciation of a university for the state was heard in the year of 1917. In that year the government of India appointed the Calcutta university commission with Sir Michael Sadler, who happened to be the Chairman of London University Commission. The commission was quite impressed with the natural surroundings of Cotton College as well as the inner functioning of the institution with brilliant academic environment. The members of the commission realised that Guwahati was the hub of Assam with the whole of the state being connected to Guwahati by railways and waterways. Except Burma, among the colleges of Calcutta University, only Cotton College served a clearly defined geographical unit. Also it was the only college to have had the scope to study the large linguistic, literary, historical, archaeological, economic, geological and other disciplines. So long as education of Cotton College was controlled by Calcutta run examinations, the state could not shape its own course of education and also the national character of the people could not be steered. The commission clearly asserted that
Guwahati qualifies as a perfect site for a university, and that cotton college had already become a form of a nucleus of a university. Commission members like Sir Michael Sadler, Sir Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay, Dr. Ziauddin and others clearly expressed such views; but they failed to explain why even in 1917 as many as 564 students from Assam got enrolled in Calcutta University (Neog, 2009, p.30). Nevertheless, the idea of an independent university for Assam began to send waves of action and reaction across the state. In 1917 itself the April session of Assam Legislative Council debated and discussed the issue and the December session of Assam Commission of the university committee of which Gopinath Bordoloi was a secretary, raised the demand of a separate university for Assam. The association was consistent in its demand. In 1923 a private member suggested on the floor of the assembly that a committee should be formed to look into the demand. However, what followed was nothing positive. Rather, in accordance with Sadler Commission’s report, Cotton College came under the Bengal government jurisdiction. Invariably Bengal government came to have a say in every educational matter of the state of Assam. This was strongly opposed by the Assam Chief Commissioner Sir Beatson Bell, the D.P.I. Cunningham and the Cotton College’s officiating Principal D. E. Roberts. But the Calcutta University syndicate lacked the voice of Assam. The voice of one or two members of Assam in the senate could hardly have an impact. Many were of the opinion that it was not yet the time for Assam to have a university of its own, to which Principal Roberts made a sharp reply saying if the time was right for Banaras, Burma and Mysore to have own universities, the same must be the case with Assam as well. “and if, as it would seem, we are between the devil and the deep sea, it maybe the wiser courage to prefer the sea, we shall at least moor out on our own course with the spirit and resolution of those who are dealing themselves with their
own destinies” (Neog, 2009, p.4). The Chief Commissioner also recommended on the same line. However nothing bore fruit. The colonial government showed no interest in giving in to the demand of an independent university in Assam. Finally the wishes and aspirations of the people of Assam got realized when Gauhati University was established on 26th January, 1948 under the Gauhati University Act, 1947. The university became functional as a teaching affiliating university with K. K. Handique as the first chancellor. With 40 post graduate departments, a post graduate correspondence school and a constituent law college, Gauhati University has more than 205 affiliated colleges offering undergraduate courses in the faculties of arts, science and commerce, law, engineering and medicine. Moreover the university also facilitates MPhil and Ph.D degrees. It receives annual financial grants from the government of Assam and also developmental grants from the UGC.

The second university in the state of Assam was established in 1965 by the Dibrugarh University Act of 1965. In course of time, Dibrugarh University as a teaching, research and affiliating university established a firm ground as a reputed educational destination in a large jurisdiction of upper Assam covering seven districts- Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji. The university has been offering courses and programmes on multiple disciplines.

Some potential initiatives in the sphere of higher education had been the establishment of two central universities at Tezpur and Silchar. The central university of Tezpur was established in Tezpur by an act of Parliament in 1994. The university has emerged as a centre of excellence in course of time. Striving to meet the developmental needs and regional aspirations of the state of Assam, Tezpur University has been offering courses
on various interdisciplinary and employment oriented courses. The university has made significant progress in the field of research too.

The Assam University Act of 1989 established the Assam University in 1994. Situated at Silchar, Assam University facilitates education in various disciplines. This teaching as well as affiliating university caters to 51 undergraduate colleges of five districts of the Barak valley.

Assam Agricultural University got established in 1968 according to the AAU act of 1968. With its headquarter at Jorhat, the jurisdiction of AAU covers the entire Assam, and is the teaching and research centre of agricultural and allied sciences.

Open and distance education emerged as a viable source of knowledge and learning in the Indian education sector. Open and distance education has been catering to the educational needs of those people who for some reason could not be a part of the formal educational sector. Using the modern communication technology open and distance education facilitates education to people irrespective of age, sex and socio economic status.

Assam first saw the emergence of open learning with the establishment of the regional centre of IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University) in Guwahati. IGNOU has been successfully catering to the increasing demands of higher education in the state in terms of enrolment. Another institution of distance and open learning started as the Institute of Distance and Open Learning as a centre of Gauhati University.

In 2006, another initiative came up with the establishment of KKHSOU (Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University) which caters to the higher education needs of learners
not touched by the formal system of regular education. KKHSOU provides courses on diverse disciplines. Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University is another destination that is engaged in facilitating knowledge on various disciplines of higher learning.

There are many other prime educational institutions which have been contributing towards promotion of higher education in the state, and have made Assam an educational destination of repute. Some of the prime higher education institutions are Guwahati Medical College, Assam Medical College (Dibrugarh), Assam Engineering College (Guwahati), Jorhat Engineering College (Jorhat) and Assam Agricultural University (Jorhat). Also, a number of universities of general as well specialised education and research have been established in the state- both public and private.

As per the data of the Directorate of Higher Education, Assam at present has 19 universities, including private and deemed universities. There are 6 government colleges, 305 provincialised colleges and 33 non-government colleges, which cater to Arts, Science and Commerce education. Moreover, there are a number of other institutions of higher education offering different courses including Medical and Engineering. There are 18 Technical and Engineering colleges including central, state and private institutions, 11 Medical Colleges and 14 management institutions. Assam also has 2 colleges for Agriculture and Forestry, 2 veterinary colleges and 20 Law colleges- government and non-government (Statistical Handbook of Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam).
4.6 Accessibility of Higher Education and the State of Assam

Indian education system is guided by the ideals of equity and social justice - principles which are reflected in the constitutional mandate regarding education as well as in the various statements and suggestions of policies, commissions and committees regarding education that have come up in the post independence period. The Indian state has taken on the responsibility of equitably distributing the opportunities of education, and especially to provide education to the underprivileged and backward sections of society. Education has thus been recognised as an efficient instrument of ensuring equal opportunities for these sections of the society, in the larger pursuit of establishing equity and social justice. The principle of equal opportunities calls for equal accessibility of all to the instruments of social and economic mobility. A marker of equality in any society is equal prospect of rising up in the ladder of a stratified society. (Chitnis, 1988).

A society, its structures and processes are all intimately related to the education system, and therefore the former cannot be insulated from the later (Beteille, 1983). The education system certainly reflects the socio-economic features of a society; and it is largely the social context which determines the outcomes of the education system. Consequently, education system ends up contributing to the perpetuation of the status quo of a society that is characterised by inequality, subordination and exploitation.

At the same time education is also a very potential indispensable tool of dissent and social change. However, what must be realised is that education alone cannot bring about social change; rather can only act as an agent of change in relation to the larger processes of socio-economic-political transformation. Otherwise, education system will
only end up mirroring and reinforcing the existing structures of sub ordination and domination (Kamat, 1986).

Higher education in the state of Assam has undergone substantial expansion in course of time. Though its growth has been impressive, it is accessible to only 12% of the pertinent age group of the population. It is pertinent to mention here that out of the total population of Assam, women constitute 51%, Scheduled Tribe 7.55%, Scheduled Tribe 12.55%, out of which Scheduled Caste women constitute 3.74% and Scheduled Tribe women constitute 6.60% (Statistical Handbook of Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam).

As reported in the MHRD Report on All India Survey on Higher Education (2015-16), compared to the all India Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 24.5%, Assam has a GER of 15.4% in the year 2015-16. While total female enrolment of India is 23.5%, Assam has a total female enrolment ratio of 14.7%. All India Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) enrolment constitute 19.9% and 14.2% respectively, and the corresponding enrolment ratio in the state of Assam is 16.8% and 19.3%. In comparison to 19.0% Scheduled Caste Female (SCF) and 12.9% Scheduled Tribe Female (STF) all India enrolment, 16.0% SCF and 18.0% STF are enrolled in the higher education sector of Assam (AISHE, 2016). Assam is thus lagging behind the national average in terms of GER, female enrolment ration and enrolment of scheduled caste population. Scheduled tribe enrolment is however more in Assam than the national average, which is also due to the fact that STs constitute a sizeable portion of total population in Assam.
Despite the expansion of higher education and accessibility to all sections of the population, Indian higher education has continued to be marred by inequality across class, caste, gender, regions. Indian education system operates amidst the social, economic, political and cultural stratification and differentiation of Indian society. In the Indian scenario, social differentiation and the corresponding caste system is a key determinant that determines and influences the educational opportunities and benefits of a large chunk of the population (Naik, 1997). The position of an individual in the caste hierarchy determines educational accessibility of an individual, upon which the socio economic status of an individual depends. Similarly, the educational attainment of an individual determines the socio economic position of an individual which in turn is determined by the caste in the social hierarchy. This forms a bi-directional condition and sets a vicious circle of educational and social backwardness (Raza, 1991, p. 58). Another obstacle towards equal accessibility of higher education system appears in the form of structures of subordination and discrimination against women. Such discriminatory structure against women is recognised as a cross sectional hurdle, and across caste, class or region, women continue to be outside the large mainstream population. Women are thus considered to bear a “cumulative burden of inequality” (Chanana, 2001, p. 293). The discriminatory traditional role expectations and cultural constraints limit the possibility of women equally realizing the benefits of valued and socially desirable professional options, which can accrue greater returns. The education system is situated in an unequal social structure of inequitable gender roles and women subordination.

The Indian state and the political leadership have recognised the need of equal opportunities and participation of women in all the spheres. That the nation needs
trained and highly qualified womenfolk to shoulder the responsibilities of economic development, was recognised and emphasised in the University Education Commission Report of 1948. In a bid towards developing a comprehensive approach for women education, The Report of the Committee on the Education of Women (1959) prescribed a number of measures. The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in 1974 however demonstrated stark disparities in the education of men and women. The National Education Policy of 1986 emphasised on the importance of education to empower the womenfolk and liberate them from the bondage of social inequality. The National Perspective Plan, 1988-2000 also emphasised the role of education in the liberation of women and in aiding their socio-economic mobility (Chanana, 2001, p. 295). Notwithstanding the assertions made in different policy statements as well as the efforts of the government, higher education still shows stark biasness against women. While women accessibility has shown considerable growth in terms of total enrolment, substantial increase has been in the field of general education; with the participation in professional courses still not being satisfactory. Though such disparities might be present among general population and men too, the same seems to be gross in case of women. While men seem to be evenly distributed across disciplines, women are largely enrolled into the arts stream.

Despite substantial expansion and changes in higher education, disparities between men and women thus continue to exist. Higher education system needs to promote the freedom brought about by modernisation and a trend of changed social values towards women’s education and career. Expansion of a relevant and economically accessible higher education system can be beneficial in enhancing women’s participation in the system and thereby empowering them. Governments, both at the central and state level
have also put in efforts according to the principles accored in the constitution, to equally distribute the benefits of modern education among the weaker sections of the society- the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. A number of affirmative measures have been initiated to counter the entrenched social structure of inequality and domination and to ensure greater participation of these groups in the higher education sector. The measures include, scholarships, reservations of seats in educational institutions for various courses and hostels, special assistance to institutions of backward areas with higher concentration of SC and ST people (Kamat, 1989). With greater expansion across the nation and the remote areas, higher education witnessed increasing number of first generation learners from the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe groups. Despite the efforts, the participation of these groups in higher education is far from satisfactory.

The following table shows enrolment by courses in Degree standard and above in the higher education sector of Assam for the year 2015-2016:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Total Enrolment</th>
<th>Scheduled Caste</th>
<th>Scheduled Tribe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D./D.Sc./M.Phil.</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>1358</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>4636</td>
<td>9863</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.Sc.</td>
<td>1657</td>
<td>4735</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.Com</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>1689</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A. &amp; B.A. (Major)</td>
<td>144729</td>
<td>336579</td>
<td>13631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Sc. &amp; B.Sc. (Major)</td>
<td>12835</td>
<td>64174</td>
<td>1386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Com &amp; B.Com (Major)</td>
<td>4579</td>
<td>30525</td>
<td>1015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.E./B.Tech (Engg) Govt.</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam
From the data it can be inferred that women population is largely concentrated in the discipline of arts both at the undergraduate and post graduate level, with not very satisfactory participation in technical discipline like engineering (18.49%). Women enrollment at the research level however shows a very encouraging share of 48.96% enrollment. Percentage of scheduled Caste enrollment to total enrollment is highest in arts and commerce (15%) and lowest in engineering (6.30%) at the undergraduate level. At the post graduate level Commerce has the highest enrollment of scheduled caste (12.01%) followed by MSc and MA. Engineering shows the lowest participation of scheduled castes (6.30%). Scheduled caste has a participation of 9.05% at the research level. The corresponding participation of scheduled tribe in higher education shows the highest participation in the field of commerce (15%) at the undergraduate level, while at the post graduate level arts and commerce have highest participation of Scheduled tribe with a corresponding 12.01% and 12% participation. In the engineering, scheduled tribe shows a better participation of 15.08% compared with 6.30% of scheduled caste enrolment. The field of science however has the lowest enrolment of scheduled tribe students with 6.99% at the undergraduate level and 8.00% at the post graduate level.

Educational opportunities of the girl students belonging to scheduled caste or tribe of backwards areas of the nation can be seriously constrained by the twin structural subordination of caste and gender combined with regional backwardness. In the year 2015-2016, the percentage of scheduled caste women in the field of engineering is only 1.23% and 3.68% in the field of research. Correspondingly, the percentage of scheduled tribe women is 3.30% and 4.63% respectively.
Thus, women and scheduled castes have the lowest enrolment in professional courses like engineering and are mostly concentrated in general education. Scheduled caste women show an unrepresentative proportion in all the disciplines of higher education which accrues significant social and economic returns. Higher education still demonstrates the social disparities even after impressive expansion of the same. The representation of the backward sections shows an uneven distribution with not encouraging participation in the professional courses, in the face of goal of making higher education a tool of social mobility for the backward people.

The ideals of equity and social justice also hold importance from the point of view of development of human resource as well as the economy. Growth in the global economy calls for a large and skilled population which requires substantial expansion and qualitative improvement of the higher education sector. However, real achievement must take into account the constitutional ideals of equity and social justice. The goal of all round development of the nation will be lost if the democratic principles of the education system are compromised. However the forces of economic liberalisation are making the state withdraw from its responsibilities towards higher education (Tilak, 2000). Increasing privatisation coupled with decreased state initiative and funding for the betterment of the education system demonstrate a downward movement in so far the state responsibilities are concerned. The brunt of this retreating role of the state would be borne mostly by the disadvantaged sections of the society who depend on the public education system and will be left to the mercies of the market. Higher education will lose the cause of upward mobility of the socially disadvantaged sections of the society by failing to provide avenues of social and economic progress.
4.7 Higher Education and Assam: Issues and Challenges

The significance of higher education in the development of a nation or a society needs no reiteration, and is well understood. Kothari Commission noted, in 1966, recognising the role of higher education in the all round development of the nation as well as the development of human resources that development of human resources was one of the major programmes in reconstruction, and that in this end there should be no limits to education to be provided. The commission was of the view that the nation should direct all educational efforts towards the development of its human resources. NPE 1986 on a similar note commented as to how a well developed educational system can form the backbone of national self reliance and that education constitutes a key investment- in the present and the future. The policy further stated as to how higher education equips individuals with an opportunity and a mindset to contemplate on the critical issues facing humanity- issues which are political, economic, social, cultural, moral and spiritual. Reiterating the fact that higher education can potentially contribute towards all round national development by disseminating specialised knowledge and skills, the policy recognised higher education as crucial for survival. A lot of time has passed since then, global and national realities have undergone significant changes since then. And the significance of higher education has only increased with increasing demand for a well developed higher education system and skilled manpower; a demand of the newly developed global knowledge economy, of national development, and of many aspirants who want to escalate in the ladder of socio-economic status in the society. However, higher education of India somewhere seems to be failing to meet the desired demands. Higher education in the state of Assam, too has been suffering from a number of loopholes.
**Inadequate number of Higher Educational Institutions**

Paucity of higher educational institutions has seriously plagued the higher education system of the state. College population index of Assam stands at 15 against national average of 28 (AISHE, 2016). 12 districts of Assam have recently been declared as educationally backward districts, where the government has recently decided to establish model colleges. The state at present has 305 provincialised colleges, of which 123 colleges have been provincialised only recently in 2017 (Directorate of Higher Education). There still remains gross inequality in the distribution of colleges between the urban and rural areas.

**Financial Constraints**

Financial constraint has remained a perennial issue in the growth and expansion of higher education in the state. Just as higher education faces the problem of resource crunch at the national level, in Assam too, financial paucity has been a limitation on the path of development of public education. Total expenditure on higher education in Assam as a percentage of GSDP is 1.31% in 2014-15, which has increased from 1.2% in 2013-14 and 1.02% in 2012-13 (AISHE, 2016).

One of the prime reasons for inadequate funding for higher education has been the strong tendency to focus on elementary, particularly on primary education. While the passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, brought a much desired change to the nation, it has had a deleterious effect on other levels of education, particularly higher education. It has come to be widely felt and accepted that achieving the objectives of elementary education depend on cutting down on expenses
of secondary and higher education. Higher education thereby got neglected in various
policy measures

Government funding for higher education both at the level of the centre as well as the
state of Assam has been insufficient. To compensate for the paucity of government
financial assistance, privatisation of education has been encouraged along with
introduction of self financing courses in public institutions. Public institutions have
witnessed rapid increase in the fee structure of the courses. Self financing courses have
levied a very high amount of fee on the students. A student of a public institution is
acquiring professional education at a very high cost.

**Problem of Quality**
Another serious concern of government higher education is that of quality. The status of
NAAC assessment and accreditation reveals concern about the quality of higher
educational institutions in Assam. Out of the total colleges in Assam, 59 colleges are
accredited with NAAC, with 10 colleges being offered ‘A’ grade, 48 with ‘B’ grade and
one with C grade. Inadequate number of teachers has been another problem that has
been plaguing the higher education system of the state. Inadequate teacher student ratio
to a great extent adversely affects the quality of education. Non creation of new posts
and halt in the process of appointment to the vacant posts- a move initiated by the
former Chief Minister of Assam, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, severely affected the public
higher education system. Another issue to have an adverse impact on the quality of
higher education system of the state has been the recruitment of part time teachers in the
institutions of higher education. Recently in 2017, the government has appointed 130
teachers in various vacant posts; and about 140 posts still to be filled up (Directorate of
Higher Education). There is serious qualm about the credibility of the part time teachers in imparting education. Inadequacy of faculty members compels the institutions to recruit part time teachers. Introduction of self financing courses in public institutions has further accelerated the process of recruiting part time teachers. While there are reservations about the quality of these teachers, non commitment and low salary are the other factors which have serious impact on their quality of teaching. The government has recently announced about opening up of new streams in 89 colleges which have been running with a single stream. But amidst this positive initiative what raises concern is the decision to run these streams with part time teachers, which will again put the aspect of quality in peril.

**Unsatisfactory Infrastructure**

Problem of infrastructure remains a perennial issue of public higher education system in Assam. The state universities and the provincialised colleges of the state have been suffering from lack of adequate state- of- the- art infrastructure and amenities, which affect the quality of education provided in these institutions. It is these state universities and provincialised colleges that cater to the largest chunk of higher education aspirants with affordable education. However, these institutions find it difficult to cope up with the expectations of the beneficiaries with regard to various facilities for development of human resource, in comparison to well equipped private institutions. Though the state government has recently provided grants to 39 colleges for the development of infrastructure, the public institutions considerably lack standard and adequate infrastructure to the satisfaction of the students.
4.8 The Shift in the Trajectory: Privatisation of Higher Education

Higher education in India in the post independence period made significant progress in a period of three decades compared to its poor condition in the pre independence period. This progress was definitely due to the efforts of the Indian government in a bid to develop scientific and teaching infrastructure as well as to produce skilful professionals and technicians. However, in the post 1990 period, the public character of higher education waned away, and it has come to be regarded more of a luxury than a public good. In fact since the early 90s most references to education, be it in plan documents or budget speeches or other govt pronouncements about supportive public policies are invariably either confined to primary education or accord very low priority to higher education. It is often asserted that given the limited resources, there is always a clash between primary and higher education and the former ought to be preferred over the latter (Tilak, 2004). This has been the trend since 1990s and in 1994, the govt even declared that higher education in India is sufficiently developed to meet the requirements of the country, and accordingly the unmet demands of higher education are not considered economically viable.

As privatisation appeared as one of the chief trends of higher education worldwide, India too did not remain aloof from the same. Privatisation calls for application of private business like principles in managing and imparting higher education, and also application of these principles in public institutions as well. Private institutions of higher education are owned and managed by private agencies, and the services that these institutions provide, are priced (Varghese, 2004). The price is accrued in the form of student fees. The fee levied on the students is correspondent to the cost of education,
and in some instances profit in addition to cost. Owned and managed by non state non public sector as they are, the private institutions are under the management and ownership of private individuals or agencies. These are not dependent on government funding for expansion and growth, and therefore do not receive any state aid, though in some countries the state may give partial grant for growth and expansion of these institutions (ibid). Private higher education includes university as well as non university institutions.

Indian higher education, though retains the traditional pattern of government aided public institutions of higher education, has come to witness a wide growth and expansion of private institutions. The post liberalised India saw a great expansion of private universities and college. Maximum portion of private higher education is shared by institutions which do not receive any aid and grant from the government, and are self financed. These institutions are owned and managed by private authorities who solely rely on revenues generated from the students to meet the requirements of growth and expansion.

The state of Assam has also eventually come under the privatized influence of higher education. Previously, a responsibility of the state, higher education is being opened for private investors. The failure of the public higher educational institutions to cater to the increasing demand for higher education among the aspirants of higher education and the demands for professional education and of employability has made the government to invite private enterprise in the higher education sector. There have been a number of private educational institutions of graduate and undergraduate level. However, they are basically affiliated to universities- public or private, within or outside the state, and have
no authority to issue degree on their own. But with the enactment of Private Universities Act of 2007, now there is a shift in the orientation of higher education in the state. The act has reflected the intention of the state to share its social onus and responsibility like education with the private forces. The argument put forward by the government is that higher education has no direct social benefit and therefore is more a burden or liability on the part of the government, as the public institutions of higher education do not bear any fruit and rather are running on deficit. State investment is more needed and intended for primary education which carries direct social benefits. The state government therefore justified the need for cutting down of government subsidies to higher education, and opening the sector for participation of the private sector. Such privatisation of higher education implies that education will be designed in line with the market principles. The private authorities will have the autonomy to generate their own fund, and the fund will basically be borne out of the fees received from students. The argument in favour of privatization of higher education has been that higher education does not hold any promise for social and economic development and reducing poverty and inequalities; and therefore government subsidy should be available only for primary education.

Just as the whole country has been realising the ever increasing demand of higher education, the state of Assam has also felt the push of rising demand of higher education with more and more aspirants willing to be a part of the higher education system. While the existing system of higher education has been trying to absorb the increasing aspirants, the existing institutions, mostly public universities have been finding it difficult to absorb the ever increasing number of aspirants. Also, the public institutions have time and again been pressurised to cater to the need of employability
of students, and to introduce professional and job oriented courses. However, to bring about such changes in the existing system of public education would need change of the existing programmes, syllabi and curricula; and it would be a process which will be complicated, not speedy and therefore would not fulfil the purpose. There is an increasing demand to orient students to an education that can enable them to get employed. A need has been felt to create a synthesis between education and job market by establishing collaboration between universities and industries. The education system has felt the need and also a responsibility to introduce courses which are multidisciplinary in nature. Moreover, courses like engineering and management have been generating much interest and attraction among the student folk, and consequently the state has felt greater need of opening up of such courses. The existing institutions have apparently failed to meet these emerging demands and needs of the higher education system. And it seemed to be a feasible and viable option to make way for private institutions to cater to these needs and demands.

Another factor cited as a reason that facilitated expansion of private education in the region is that of resource constraints. The government has time and again been arguing about the paucity of funds and how it is unable to meet the needs of increasing aspirants of higher education. The government has also been arguing that it is more responsible towards ensuring growth and expansion of primary education and would do every possible bit to ensure the same. Also, the public institutions, the government argues do not accrue benefit and are rather running on deficit. Public institutions of higher education are therefore more of a burden and liability on the government, former Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi commented. Government therefore is willing to share the responsibility of higher education with the private sector, which is expected to
provide education on courses and programmes which are much in demand and are not offered by the public institutions (Assam Assembly Debates, 2006). The then education minister of Assam, Ripun Borah argued in assembly while introducing the Assam Private University Act, 2007 that establishment of private universities is in favour of catering to the needs of the higher education system in that these can offer the much needed courses of study which will also generate employability among the youth of the state. According to Borah, private initiative in the higher education sector would also put a check on the increasing migration of students outside the state in pursuit of higher education in professional courses (Assam Assembly Debates, 2007).

The state of Assam thus witnessed a shift in the political design of higher education. Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Premier of Assam, who himself was an educationist of great repute, considered higher education integral to the development of a state. Keeping the education department under his own domain of responsibility, Bordoloi wanted to ensure the destiny of Assam and established Gauhati University with severe hard work and toil-moving from door to door collecting fund. Bordoloi, feeling the needs of the middle and poor class students, established B. Barooah College, to cater to the educational needs of the poor students of the region. After Gauhati University was established, he expressed his wish that education should be as free as possible, and that university should be kept away from political interference (Neog, 2009). When talking of the aim of higher education, he said the aim should be to create such men of knowledge, who can feel the needs of the common people and try to satisfy the same. However, the ideas of the political leaders have undergone a change (ibid). Tarun Gogoi, who was the Chief Minister of Assam from 2001 to 2016, has termed higher education as a liability. In Assembly Debate of Assam Legislative Assembly, Gogoi
argued that in this era of Knowledge societies where economic development is synonymous with knowledge, we have to take the help and support of private sector, if possible even beg them for money. Arguing that higher education is no longer a prerogative of the elite class, the government has to pave way for establishment of higher educational institutions of repute and for that he debated the case for private investment (Assam Assembly Debates, 2006). Ripun Borah, the then Education Minister when Assam Private Universities Bill was passed, also justified the case of private investment in higher education stating the migration of students to outside places. According to him, to check the brain drain of the youth of Assam, we need to establish institutions of technical and professional education in the state itself and for that private investment would be necessary. It was further clarified that such institutions of higher education will primarily be focussed on technical, professional and vocational courses, and would try to engage in industry interface to create skilled professionals eligible for the market (Assam Assembly Debates, 2006). In 2011, the government of Assam even urged the universities to apply for loans from banks and other financial institutions to implement their academic and other infrastructural requirements (The Telegraph, 2011). The universities were asked to explore new sources of funding to carry out its schemes, they added. Dispur itself agreed to become a guarantor of loans for the universities, which they could repay by mobilising internal resources. They were told that the repayment of loans should not be a problem as the universities can garner substantial amount of revenue by introducing professional and job-oriented courses and by increasing fees reasonably. Such move by the government also pointed towards a drive for privatisation of higher education (ibid).

With the government justifying the importance of private participation in the higher education, and the opposition too supporting the government standpoint, the intervention of the private sector in the higher education sector got crystallized with the enactment of the Assam Private Universities Act of 2007. It is with this act that formally the government of Assam set the stage for private higher education in the state. After the enactment of the private universities act, a number of private universities have come up in the higher education scenario of Assam. The former Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi, implied that higher education is more of a liability for the government. Gogoi argued in Assam Legislative Assembly that the present era of ‘Knowledge Societies’ where economic development is synonymous with knowledge, the government cannot alone carry on the responsibility of higher education. He argued that the government is in need of help and support of private sector to expand and enhance the higher education sector of the state, and if need be they might even have to beg for money. Gogoi opined that higher education is no longer the prerogative of the elite class with ever increasing aspirants in the society. The government is therefore supposed to establish higher educational institutions of repute, and for that purpose he put forward the case for private investment (Assam Assembly Debates, 2006, p. 144). Ripun Borah, the then Education Minister when Assam Private Universities Bill was passed, also justified the case of private investment in higher education stating the migration of students to outside places. According to him, to check the brain drain of the youth of Assam, we need to establish institutions of technical and professional education in the state itself and for that private investment would be necessary. He was of the view that such institutions of higher education will primarily be focussed on
technical, professional and vocational courses, and would try to engage in industry interface to create skilled professionals eligible for the market (Assam Assembly Debates, 2007, p. 233). The government of Assam also urged the universities to apply for loans from banks and other financial institutions to implement their academic and other infrastructural requirements (The Telegraph, 2011). The universities were asked to explore new sources of funding to carry out its schemes. Dispur itself agreed to become a guarantor of loans for the universities, which they could repay by mobilising internal resources. They were told that the repayment of loans should not be a problem as the universities can garner substantial amount of revenue by introducing professional and job-oriented courses and by increasing fees reasonably. Such move by the government was considered as a drive for privatisation of higher education (The Telegraph, 2011).

It is imperative to mention here that the need for technical education is not something new that the political leaders argued. Omeo Kumar Das, the first education minister of the state, expressed concerns about the not so developed educational system of the state. He was of the opinion that in the context of the development programme and national objective of a socialistic pattern of society, the average aim of educational reform should be to prepare the average citizen for the obligation arising from the new social order and to train the technical personnel required for the development programme. According to Das, the state was particularly deficient in technical manpower and shortage of engineers and technical manpower has been the sole reason for the government’s failure in the first plan. Expressing concern that expansion of training facilities has not been commensurate with the increase in the demand for trained technical personnel, he expressed the desire for further expansion of the same.
It was also during 1990s that the members expressed their support for development of technical education in the state, and said that the government should emphasise more on technical education. As the country stepped into a liberal economy with privatisation of services and education has also geared up for the new drive of privatisation, the education ministers as well as the members of assembly expressed their support for private education. They were of the view that just as central government was emphasising on the importance and need of private education, government of Assam should also give impetus to private and vocational education. We should also strive to make our education system more professional and vocation oriented, and we need to design and reform our education system accordingly. A lot of students come for admissions at ITIs, because they get many job avenues after completion of their course of study, the members argued. “But what have we got/accrued/received form general education? It has only created lakhs of unemployed youth”, they argued (Assam Assembly Debates, 1996, p. 231). Therefore in every district there should be at least one institution of technical education to generate more and more employable youth, they further argued.

From 2004 onwards, there began a strengthened case for professional, vocational and employment oriented courses. Initiatives were planned and taken to introduce such courses in government public institutions; for example, MCA course was introduced in Gauhati University. A number of courses in the lines of professional, vocational and employment oriented courses were also introduced in Assam Engineering College.

From 2006-07, government started announcing their wishes and plans to initiate private investments in higher education. Considering that private investment in higher education has become imperative, they argued that private institutions would act as
viable means of imparting professional and employment oriented courses. It was argued that to prevent the large number of students from moving outside the state for technical and professional education, we have to open the space for private institutions. Both the government and the opposition agreed on setting up of private universities to provide courses on the much demanded professional and technical education, unlike what is offered in the publicly managed universities.

The debates mostly revolved around betterment of primary education with higher education being accorded only a tertiary attention. The members argued that with a strained economy and a dilapidated system of primary education, there is no point in spending crores of rupees in establishing new universities. There were no constructive innovative ideas and discussions on higher education policy in accordance with the ideals and aims of higher education. There has not been any significant innovative idea and design about higher education. There seems to be the absence of a proper policy design for higher education unique to the state.

In the absence of any comprehensive policy design of its own, irrespective of the party in power, the government seem to follow the national design of higher education. As the whole nation geared itself up for privatisation of higher education which reflected in various policies of the Indian government, various states initiated their own policies and established private universities and institutions. Political milieu in Assam too has adopted a significantly changed approach to higher education, that is, to initiate privatisation in the higher education sector. With the ever increasing demand of higher education along with a rising popularity of professional education, the government intended to meet the challenge of expansion of higher education by involving and actively engaging the private sector. Both the ruling party and the opposition
unanimously agreed upon promoting private initiative in the higher education sector. Regarding courses too, both the ruling and opposition agreed upon putting the thrust on technical and professional courses. Much in line with the global and national idea and design, the government of Assam has initiated a similar policy design to reshape the higher education system of the state. Participation of the private sector in the development and expansion of higher education in the state has been considered imperative.

4.10 Private Institutions of Higher Education in Assam

Assam has had a number of private institutions operating in the higher education sector of the state. Of the total institutions of higher education in Assam, three fourth is constituted by private institutions. Assam has only 6 full-fledged government colleges and 305 provincialised colleges, and 33 non-government colleges. Significant numbers of higher education aspirants are absorbed by the non government colleges. All the private colleges however do not fall in the same category, and are primarily of two kinds. There are some colleges which are managed by private sector, but receive aids and grants from the government, and thus are aided and funded colleges. They avail grants and aids from the government for managing their recurrent expenditure and at times, complete capital expenditure. From the financial point of view, they are very much similar to government colleges in that it is the government that manages the financial aspects of educational capacity building and growth (Tilak, 1995). Almost 90 percent of private colleges operating in the state are of this category, that is, provincialised colleges. The other type of private colleges consists of the unaided colleges which do not receive any grant or aid from the government. These institutions

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9 See [https://directoratoofhighereducation.assam.gov.in/](https://directoratoofhighereducation.assam.gov.in/)
are managed as well as funded by the private agencies. All the financial requirements are managed and administered by the private ownership itself. As they do not receive any financial assistance from the government, the expenditure is met by accruing revenue in the form of student fee and capitation fee- which is the sum of money to be paid by the student at the time of admission, which is most of the time a large amount of money. Total privatisation of education is seen in these institutions where the ownership is not only managing the financial administration, but also trying to make profit. The government does not have any role in these institutions; the government does not provide any aid, nor does it exercise any control or influence (Tilak, 1991). These institutions came to occupy a major portion of higher education management in the whole of India. It was since 1980s that these private institutions proliferated at a very high magnitude, which had a minimal existence till 1970s. Most of these institutions were established to cater to professional, technical and vocational education which is very much in demand among the youth and which also bear more possibility of profit making. These institutions were established to meet the demands of education which can generate employability among the youth. However, these institutions do not meet the demands and wishes of the whole of society; and only serves the needs of the upper middle classes of the society who do not get an entry into the government colleges on the basis of merit, but have the potential to pay exorbitant amount of fees (Tilak, 2005). Thus private higher educational institutions continued to grow unabated. The government has also been supportive to the growth and expansion of these institutions in so far as there has been no control of the former over the latter. Despite that fact there remains a vast gap between the fees to be paid by the students in government in unaided private institutions, the government has allowed the growth of these private institutions.
Thus, paucity of resources as argued by the government coupled with increasing number of aspirants and rising demand for vocational professional education have facilitated expansion of private education in the state despite there being huge discrepancies in terms of fees and educational quality. Another argument that facilitated expansion of private institutions has been that those who can afford to pay can be made to pay high price of private education. Also private professional education requires more resources than general education and also accrues high returns and profits. However, while private education continued to grow and expand, concerns about the effects of private higher education with regard to accessibility and quality of education have also arisen (Kaul, 1993). This carries serious implications for the goals of the Indian constitution to establish a just and democratic society.

Private institutions run primarily on the condition of profit motive, profit making being the principal agenda of the private agencies. These institutions primarily serve the educational needs of the urban middle class population who possess the affordability to acquire private higher education (Kaul, 1993). These institutions have also been found to have unqualified or less qualified teachers and dissatisfactory quality of infrastructure, which affect the quality of education. These also perpetuate the dominant structures of hierarchy in society by entrenching socio economic inequality. They also carry the potential to reinforce anti modern and community sentiments which might give rise to a segregated society. In the process a differentiated, unequal and elite system of higher education develops. It further strengthens segregation of the society and obstructs social mobility of the weaker sections of the society. Private institutions also generate excess number of graduates which work as a drainage of financial
resources. The graduates of these private institutions are also characterised by huge unemployment, who seem to prefer profitable jobs with high returns (ibid).

Assam has had a number of private institutions of higher education affiliated to the state universities, it was with the enactment of the Private Universities Act in 2007 that a formal initiative was put in place and a number of private universities have come into existence since then.

The first private university to come into existence in the state is the Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU) which was created under the Assam Private Universities Act of 2007 and established by the Assam Don Bosco University Act of 2009. A state university in the private sector, ADBU is located in Guwahati, Assam. The educational and research university is founded and managed by the Salesians of Don Bosco; and the execution is carried out by the Don Bosco Society of Azara, Guwahati. ADBU offers courses in the disciplines of Engineering, Management, Social Sciences along with facilitating research and Distance and Online Learning.

Assam Down Town University, the second state private university came into existence through the Assam Down Town University Act of 2010. Located in Panikhaiti, Guwahati, the university is founded by the Down Town Charity Trust and is executed by the Down Town Hospital Limited. The university offers academic programmes in over 50 disciplines like Engineering, Management, Allied Health, Nursing, Pharmacy, Hospitality, Skill Development etc. Moreover, the university offers PhD programme and also carries out a number of programmes in distance mode.

Kaziranga University established in 2012 is another state private university located in Jorhat, Assam. The educational as well as research university, initially known as Assam
Kaziranga University, was established through the Assam Kaziranga University act of 2012 created under the Assam Private University Act of 2007. The research university offers programmes on various disciplines like engineering, management and basic sciences, and has different constituent units to cater to different programmes, known as schools.

Located in Bardowa, Nagaon, Mahapurusha Srimanta Shankardev Viswavidyalaya is another private university established in Assam in 2014 through the Mahapurusha Srimanta Shankardev Viswavidyalaya Act, 2013. Named after the great saint of Assam, Mahapurusha Shrimanta Shankardeva, the university is founded by Shrimanta Shankardeva Sangha and sponsored by the Shrimanta Shankardeva Education and Socio-Economic Development Trust. The university in its Guwahati and Nagaon campus offers courses in different subjects--- Assamese, English, Sociology, Education, Economics, Philosophy, Social Work, Juridical Studies, Computer Application, Sankardeva Studies, Yogic Science and Naturopathy.

Royal Global University is another addition to private institutions of higher education. Established in 2017, Royal Global University was created by the Assam Royal Global University Act of 2013. The university has come up under the umbrella of Royal Group of Institutions and offers programmes on a range of disciplines ranging from Engineering, Management, Applied and Pure Science, Architecture, Business, Commerce, Communication and Media, Law and Administration, Behavioural and Allied Science, Fine Arts, Language to Fashion Designing, Information Technology.

The most recent addition to private higher education in Assam is the establishment of Krishnaguru Adhyatmik Vishvavidyala. Established under the Krishnaguru
Adhyatmik Visvavidyalaya Act, 2017 the university is founded by the Krishnaguru Foundation and is located at Nasatra, Barpeta, Assam. The university aims to cater to disciplines like- Humanities and Social Sciences, Health and Paramedical, Science and Technology as well different courses under the Skill Development Hub.

Thus, in the last 10 years, the state of Assam has had six private universities and a number of private colleges. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) (2015-16) conducted by the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD), India at present has 78% privately managed institutions of higher education of which 64% is Private-unaided and 14% is Private aided. Andhra Pradesh has gone through maximum amount of privatisation with more than 80% Private-unaided colleges and Tamil Nadu has 76% Private-unaided Colleges. While Bihar has 13% private un-aided colleges and Assam has 10% Private-unaided colleges, according to the report. According to the same report while 12% population of relevant age group of 18-23 years is enrolled in higher educational institutions, only 3.42% is enrolled in private colleges, while 96.57% is enrolled in government colleges. At the university level, out of total enrolment, while 50.44% of students are enrolled in state public universities, 4.86% students are enrolled in state private universities. Privatisation of higher education thus has had a limited expansion till now compared to some other states of India in terms of enrolment, with majority of the students still enrolled in government institutions. However, the period since 2007 witnessed simultaneous growth of public and private universities with 6 universities established by the private sector out of the newly established 14 universities.
### 4.11 Government Endeavour in Higher Education: Emerging Trends

While the state has witnessed increasing privatisation of higher education, many government initiatives have also been carried out for expansion of higher education. A number of state universities have come up in the last ten years. From 2007 onwards eight state universities have been established including an open university and a women’s university. Following is the list of universities in Assam-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Year of establishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gauhati university</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibrugarh university</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Agricultural University</td>
<td>Jorhat</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam University</td>
<td>Silchar</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tezpur University</td>
<td>Tezpur</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Don Bosco University</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodoland University</td>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Down Town University</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Rajiv Gandhi University of Co-operative Management</td>
<td>Sivasagar</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Science and Technology University</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srimanta Sankardeva University of Health Sciences</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Name</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton College State University (Now Cotton University)</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaziranga University</td>
<td>Jorhat</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumar Bhaskar Varma Sanskrit and Ancient Studies University</td>
<td>Nalbari</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Women’s University</td>
<td>Jorhat</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya</td>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Global University</td>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishnaguru Adhyatmik Viswavidyalaya</td>
<td>Barpeta</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.11.1 Public Expenditure in Higher Education

With higher education being opened for alternative sources of funding including privatisation, the government at the centre has been seen cutting down on expenditure on higher education. In case of Assam, total expenditure on higher education as a percentage of GSDP is 1.31% in 2014-15, which has increased from 1.2% in 2013-14 and 1.02% in 2012-13 (AISHE, 2016), which is below the percentage at the national level.
The following figure shows the trend of budget allocation for higher education from the year 2001-2002 to 2014-15:

![Graph showing budget allocation trend]

Source: Directorate of Higher Education

From what can be inferred from the trend of government allocation towards higher education, overall government expenditure has increased over the years. While non-plan budget and expenditure shows a continuous increasing trend, plan budget and expenditure does not show a corresponding upward trend. The trend of plan budget and expenditure rather has been quite low. The increase in total budget expenditure has primarily been due to the rise in non-plan expenditure. It is pertinent to mention here that while plan budget consist of the capacity building, infrastructure and other facilities, non-plan expenditure basically consist of salaries and other allowances-which carry significant political outcomes.
The following diagram shows the trend of government allocation of funds to state universities during the period 2001-02 to 2014-15:

The trend of allocation to state universities by the government also shows an upward trend. Here also, non-plan expenditure shows more an upward trend than plan expenditure. The continuous increase in allocation to state universities might primarily be due to establishment of new public universities. From 2013-14 both plan and non plan allocation to state universities show a significantly upward trend.

4.11.2 New Government Endeavours

Corresponding to the trend at the national level and also in various states of India, the state of Assam too has adopted the drive for privatisation of higher education. Along with the drive for privatisation, the state has witnessed various endeavours on the part of the government in the higher education sector, which need to be examined. The state of Assam for a long time has been clamouring for more higher educational institutions. There are many regions which lack the adequate number of higher education institutions. 12 districts of Assam have been identified as EBD (Educationally
Backward Districts). The Government of Assam has proposed to establish a Model Degree College in each of the EBDs. Under this scheme of Model Degree Colleges (MDC), the total allocation is Rs. 8 crore per MDC where the Central Government shall provide assistance to the extent of 50% of the capital cost for establishment of each college, limited to Rs. 4.0 crore. The scheme of MDCs in EBD’s has been undertaken by Rashtriya Uccha Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA).\(^\text{10}\)

The BJP government that is in power in the state since 2015 has established five new degree colleges in the state in the name of Pandit Deendayal Upadhayay. With these colleges, now the number of government colleges in Assam is 305 (Directorate of Higher Education). Moreover, a total of 134 colleges have been provincialised. The 100 years old Cotton College has also been upgraded to a university named Cotton College. The government has also planned to upgrade three colleges to universities. Erstwhile Bajali College is to be upgraded to Bhattadev University, erstwhile Hojai College is to be upgraded to Kaviguru Ravindra Nath Tagore University, while Madhavdev College is to be upgraded to Madhavdev University. A budget of 2.00 crores is decided for these three new universities (Directorate of Higher Education). While from one point of view these initiatives are appreciable, looking at these from another point of view raises speculation as to if upgradation is a way to reduce government funding to public institutions. A university is financially autonomous and depends less on the government for financial aids and grants. With the upgradation of a college to a university, the students need to pay higher fee than they have to in a college. As the students of Cotton College (which was a fully government college) had to pay a significantly increased amount of fee after the upgradation, even after students’ protest to decrease fee which

\(^{10}\) See [https://rusa.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/list-of-beneficiary-colleges-under-rusa-assam](https://rusa.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/list-of-beneficiary-colleges-under-rusa-assam)
was fixed at a much higher rate. The same will be the case with other three provincialised colleges of the state as well. The government has also taken a decision to establish cluster universities by merging three or four colleges. While it will enable the universities to have more academic freedom in terms of introducing new courses or in matters of research, it will also increase the financial burden of the students. The recent move of the government to degrade Assam Women’s University to a technical institute further raises questions regarding the motive and intentions of the government towards public higher education system.

Another issue of concern that creates apprehension is the influence of politics in the sphere of education. While it is the responsibility of the government to establish, enhance and improve a higher education system directed towards the constitutional ideals of equity and justice, state obligation, support and fund should not be confused with state control over educational policies (University Education Commission, 1948). Every educational decision is however a political decision and political aims do find place in education. Indian education system many a times has turned an instrument for augmenting political ideology and agenda. It is widely recognised as to how the content of education in India has come to be politically decided, which is the case with any society. There has been a systematic effort to popularise particular personalities, political parties and ideologies through educational institutions along with other governmental projects and schemes. One way of this systematic attempt has been through the nomenclature of public institutions. Post independent India witnessed numerous projects, schemes, educational institutions after the name of the three personalities of the Congress party. This has surely been an agenda to popularise the party and milk it to the party’s electoral advantage. Many Indian states have witnessed a
similar sight, Assam not being an exception too. Naming of institutions of higher education after particular personalities and the geographical location of these institutions are markers towards the political motivation behind them. Proposal of establishment of Bhattadev University in lower Assam, Madhavdev University in upper Assam and Rabindranath Tagore University in central Assam speaks of more political agenda than what meets the eye.

The BJP government that has come to power in Assam in 2016 has endeavoured to set up 22 model colleges in the educationally backward districts of the state where GER is less than national average under a scheme with central assistance. Setting up of model colleges is very much a welcomed endeavour on the part of the state. However, what evokes the curiosity and concern of the civil society is naming these educational institutions after one particular individual. When we try to understand the personality behind these institutions, we find the intricate work of a particular ideology- the ideology which guides the political party in power. Deendayal Upadhyay was a leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha who believed in and spread the ideology of Hindutva nationalism. Himanta Biswa Sarma, the current education minister of the state commented that the government decided to name all the model colleges after Pandit Deendayal to pay tribute to his great ideology of “Integrated Humanism” and as a mark of respect in this birth centenary year. While there certainly need not be any problem with recognising an ideology or erudition of a particular scholarly individual, what propels common curiosity is as to what is the need to name all the colleges to be set up by the government after one particular individual. It raises a pang of suspicion in the mind of every conscious citizens of the society as to if it is an attempt to legitimise a particular ideology by political patronage? Is it an attempt to influence society and
creating a sense of consent regarding a particular ideology which happens to be the 
ruled ideology- an attempt at what Gramsci termed as “cultural hegemony”? Such 
attempts at expanding political and ideological footprints by using the tool of education 
compels one to wonder if the government is trying to develop a hegemonic culture by 
using the subtle force of ideology, rather than force or coercion. This move of the 
government faced severe criticisms and protests across the state as an impingement on 
the secular and multicultural ethos of the Assamese society and a threat to democracy. 
Using ideological juggernauts and infiltration into the academic sphere by the political 
society, which is not a new phenomenon preceded by the earlier party in government, 
raises the question as to whether political frontiers clash with educational space, and as 
to what is the extent to which the political milieu should interfere in the cultural sphere 
of the society, of which education is a major component. While using cultural 
educational tools to fulfil political objectives is not a new phenomenon, in the new 
setting, political interference in the educational sphere appears to be an attempt to 
augment the non state private sector. Establishment of two private universities in the 
state in the names of Mahapurusha Shrimanta Shakardeva Viswavidyalaya and 
Krishnaguru Adhyatmik Viswavidyalaya points towards this tacit relationship between 
politics, culture and private capital formation. Cultural icons on the one hand help in 
gaining political legitimacy, and also legitimise the private endeavours in the sphere of 
education- thus serving as a two edged weapon.

4.11.3 Self-financed Courses in Public Institutions

Another phenomenon that broke out as a result of resource crunch on the part of the 
government and the increasing demand of professional courses is introduction of job 
oriented professional courses in public institutions which are self financed. With the
consultation of Vice Chancellors of Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University, professional courses have been introduced in many public colleges of the state, along with introduction of such courses in both the universities. Institutions of higher education across the country have started facing resource crunch and their dependence on the government at the state and centre and bodies like UGC has increased. Institutions like MHRD, UGC, AICTE have been recommending different measures to help the institutions cope with the challenge of resource crunch. Different commissions and committees have also been making various suggestions to make the institutions financially self sufficient. As discussed in the previous chapter, a number of committees like the CABE report on Gyanam Committee Report, Punnayya Committee, A Policy Framework for Reforms in Education have made suggestions on how colleges and universities can be self sufficient by adopting different measures like increasing fee, introducing self financing courses et al.

Institutions across the country- government and government aided have been facing shortage of funds to meet the expenditure. The private institutions, too, after a point of time, are seen to ask for government aid to meet different fronts of expenditure (Harman, 2008, p. 85). All over the world, universities are asked to raise resources to reduce dependence on the government for funds, which has made the higher education institutions look for alternative source of funding.

With the changed societal needs, there appeared corresponding changes in the needs of higher education too. Keeping this fact in mind, UGC initiated vocational undergraduate courses since mid 90s. In course of time, many universities and colleges started off certain new courses which had high demands from the ends of the students and had market value. These courses have been termed as self financed courses as these are
financed by the students themselves and for which the institutions do not receive any aid or fund. Such courses include undergraduate, postgraduate, diploma, certificate courses which range from knowledge based to skill oriented disciplines. Most of the courses offered through self financing mode are market driven and in tune with the demands of the students; the course and curriculum being designed accordingly (Rao and Singh, 2003). Introduction of these courses has enabled the institutions to generate additional revenue which is utilised for maintaining the courses and running the respective departments.

Like the whole of the country, the state of Assam too has initiated the phenomenon of self financed courses in the higher education system. The universities and colleges have been carrying out the self financed courses on different disciplines, which are primarily market driven and in great demand among the students. Gauhati University introduced self financed courses like MBA, MCA and such courses have been introduced in Dibrugarh University too. Significantly, the government has been in support of introduction of professional self financed courses in public institutions, and has asked universities and colleges to introduce these subjects, which is now a common phenomenon in the state. Almost all the government and provincialised colleges offer these self financed courses through the direction of the government- who consulted the Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University and asked them to allow all the colleges to provide these courses so that they can become self sufficient. Accordingly various professional and vocational courses have been introduced in public colleges- BBA, BCA, tourism, skill development, Retail Management course et al.

When professional courses got momentum, universities introduced these courses, and colleges too were asked to open these courses. From 2000 onwards government colleges
introduced professional courses by order of the government. These courses are completely self financed; the cost to be borne completely by the students. Dr. Dinesh Baishya, former Principal of B. Baruah College and a noted educationist and social activist of the region said “I protested initially, but finally I had to give in. It is unacceptable how in a single institution, that too public, students have to pay different fees with such great differentiation of fee. Government does not give fund to manage these professional courses. There is a market related to computer science and other professional courses and the aim is to produce manpower for these markets. Almost all the students who study these disciplines go for private market related jobs”\textsuperscript{11}. Dr. Baishya expressed concern about these courses and the various consequences that emanate from the phenomenon including the quality of teachers. Various issues related to the self financed courses are explained in the next chapter.

4.12 Conclusion

The history of higher education in the state of Assam was thus marked by indolence until the establishment of Cotton College- the first higher educational institution in 1901 and Gauhati University- the first university in 1948 despite the state coming under the British rule way back in 1828. Though there has been an impressive growth of higher education in the state since then, the system has been marred by different constraints ranging from low enrolment ratio, inadequate college population index, and financial constraints to infrastructural inadequacy. Also public institutions of higher education have failed to cater to the rising demand for higher education with ever increasing aspirants and the increasing demand for professional education to meet the issue of

\textsuperscript{11} Educationist and social activist of the state of Assam, former Principal of B. Baruah College, Guwahati; Personal interview conducted on 20.07.2016
unemployability. Accordingly, Assam has followed the footnote of the centre and formally set the stage for establishment of private higher educational institutions by enacting the Assam Private Universities Act, 2007. Privatisation of higher education, the government believed, would reduce the burden of the government and would facilitate the provision of professional education. The government wanted these institutions to primarily emphasise on professional education unlike public universities and accordingly six private universities have come into existence since 2007. A parallel development has been the introduction of the self financed courses in public institutions which was also a drive to boost professional education and make the institutions financially self sufficient thereby reducing the financial dependence on the government. There has also been simultaneous establishment of a number of state universities and since 2007 there has been impressive expansion of university system with the establishment of fourteen universities including eight state public universities. While there has been privatisation of higher education, simultaneously there has not been witnessed a decreasing trend of public funding of higher education. Total allocation to higher education including fund to state universities shows an upward trend, though the increase has primarily been in non-plan expenditure. One major development witnessed lately in the educational scenario of Assam has been a drive to establish educational institutions guided by political and ideological orientations. Though it is not a new phenomenon in so far it has been noticed both at the level of national government and the preceding party in power, in the new paradigm, cultural and educational apparatuses work not only as instruments of political legitimisation, but also legitimisation of private capital formation.