

Unravelling the Socio-Economic, Gender and Accessibility Dimensions of School Dropout in Udalguri, Assam

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HOW TO CITE:

Florence Daimari, Papiya Dutta, Lilika K Zhimomi (2026). Unravelling the Socio-Economic, Gender and Accessibility Dimensions of School Dropout in Udalguri, Assam International Journal of Special Education, 41(22s), 1179 - 1191

ABSTRACT

This study explores how school dropout unfolds in Udalguri district of Assam, focusing on economic vulnerability, gender, community background, school accessibility, parental support and government educational assistance. Using a descriptive cross-sectional design, the study drew on data from dropout respondents, currently enrolled students, teachers and parents/guardians, selected through a non-probability sample. Data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulations. Among students who had dropped out, financial difficulty was by far the most commonly cited reason (95.0%). Long distance to school (45.0%) and household responsibilities (20.0%) were also important, while smaller proportions reported the need to support family income or work (12.5%), poor academic performance (10.0%), early marriage (7.5%) and lack of interest in studies (5.0%). Most dropout respondents had last attended upper primary (40.0%) or high school (30.0%), and 57.5% had been out of school for more than three years. Distance-related barriers were more common among ST respondents than among General-category respondents, and early marriage was cited only by female respondents. Even though currently enrolled students and parents reported strong parental encouragement and good access to basic educational benefits, frequent absence, shortages of learning materials and long periods out of school were still common among students who had dropped out. The findings suggest that in Udalguri, dropout arises from the interplay of economic, spatial, household, gender and institutional constraints, not simply from low educational aspiration. To improve retention, policies should combine livelihood-sensitive support with transport and

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transition assistance, gender-responsive measures and regular follow-up of students at risk of dropping out.

Keywords: School dropout; rural education; tribal education; educational access; Assam.

1. Introduction

Education is widely seen as a key way for people to build capabilities, improve their livelihoods, and take part more fully in social and economic life. For individuals, more education is linked to better job prospects and greater chances of moving up socially. At the societal level, improvements in educational participation and completion contribute to human capital formation, productivity, social cohesion and the reduction of intergenerational disadvantage (Kumar et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2021). Educational outcomes depend on more than individual ability; they are shaped by household conditions, parental education, school quality, cultural norms and public policy (Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2021). Yet access to school does not necessarily translate into completion. School dropout marks a point where educational opportunity turns into educational exclusion. Dropout should not be seen simply as an isolated decision by a student. It is often the result of a cumulative process shaped by economic pressures, academic difficulties, family responsibilities, geographical barriers, social expectations and institutional conditions (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024; Parreño, 2019). The present study is situated in Udalguri district of Assam, a region marked by socio-economic diversity, mixed livelihood patterns and the presence of Bodo, Assamese, Adivasi, Nepali, Bengali and other communities. In such a context, the issue is not only whether children enter school, but whether they are able to remain in school through key transition points, particularly from primary to upper-primary and secondary levels. The study therefore examines school dropout in Udalguri district with three main objectives: first, to describe the socio-demographic and educational characteristics of dropout and currently enrolled

students; second, to identify the reported economic, spatial, household, gender-related and academic factors associated with school dropout; and third, to explore how parental support, school conditions and government educational assistance are perceived to influence educational continuation. This focus is important because dropout reflects broader structural constraints rather than low educational aspiration alone, and it has serious implications for educational inequality and social mobility.

Research in India and neighbouring contexts points to poverty, earning compulsions, parental education, household responsibilities, academic difficulties and school-related factors as key drivers of dropout. Banik and Neogi's study in North-East India, for instance, linked dropout to earning compulsions, household responsibilities, difficulties in accessing school, unsuitable school timings and limited parental awareness (Banik & Neogi, 2015). Gouda and Sekher's analysis of National Family Health Survey data showed that parental education, household characteristics and economic circumstances play a central role (Gouda & Sekher, 2014). Reddy and Sinha argued that children are often "pushed out" of schooling by circumstances beyond their control, including economic and family conditions and inadequate institutional support for first-generation learners (Reddy & Sinha, 2010). Studies from other South and Southeast Asian settings similarly emphasise the role of financial constraints, domestic work and socio-cultural expectations in shaping discontinuation (Haryani, 2022; Parreño, 2019).

Udalguri district illustrates this combination of challenges. Created from the former Darrang district in 2004, it lies in northern Assam and shares an international boundary with Bhutan. The district includes plains, foothills, rivers and forested areas, and its economy depends heavily on agriculture, tea-garden employment, small-

scale activities and forest-based livelihoods (Mahanta et al., 2025; Ministry of Education, 2024). Although the district has government, provincialised, private and tea-garden schools, educational discontinuation remains a concern, especially at the upper-primary and secondary levels. Tribal and tea-garden communities may face additional disadvantages associated with low household resources and first-generation learning (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Mahanta et al., 2025). Economic factors are especially important in contexts marked by poverty and insecure livelihoods. Banik and Neogi's research in North-East India showed that poverty and earning compulsions can push children out of school, while household responsibilities and difficulties in accessing school make discontinuation more likely (Banik & Neogi, 2015). Gouda and Sekher's analysis of NFHS-3 data indicated that children of illiterate parents had substantially greater exposure to dropout risk and that parental education, household composition and economic conditions were important predictors (Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Haryani, 2022). This evidence suggests that poverty affects schooling in several ways: it can directly limit what households can spend on education, raise the opportunity cost of keeping children in school, push children into domestic work, and encourage their participation in paid or family-based economic activities. Financial hardship, then, should not be understood only in terms of school fees. It also includes the broader economic opportunity cost of keeping children in school (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024; Parreño, 2019). Parental education, gender norms and physical access to school constitute additional recurring factors in the literature. Parents with little formal schooling often have fewer educational resources and may find it harder to help their children with schoolwork. At the same time, low educational attainment often goes together with poverty and insecure employment, so it is hard to separate the specific effect of parental education from these other disadvantages (Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Paul et al.,

2021; Kumar et al., 2023; Haryani, 2022). Boys and girls may encounter different forms of educational pressure, with boys expected to contribute to household income and girls facing domestic responsibilities, restrictions on mobility or early marriage (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Parreño, 2019). Distance may increase travel time and cost and can interact with safety, transportation availability and household perceptions of schooling, particularly in rural and geographically dispersed settlements (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2024; Mahanta et al., 2025). Empirical evidence from Udalguri challenges a simplistic assumption that dropout results primarily from weak parental commitment. Among current students and parents in this study, high levels of parental encouragement and assistance with studies were reported, yet dropout and absenteeism persisted despite such positive parental attitudes (Paul et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2023; Haryani, 2022). In Udalguri, school dropout is best understood as the outcome of interacting structural and household constraints rather than as a consequence of individual educational disinterest. Economic vulnerability constitutes the strongest underlying pressure, but its effects are mediated by spatial accessibility, household responsibilities, gender norms, parental educational background and institutional conditions (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2021; Reddy & Sinha, 2010). Conceptually, the study views school dropout as the outcome of interacting household, economic, spatial, gender and institutional constraints, wherein household poverty and livelihood insecurity generate economic pressure and opportunity costs of schooling, which combine with distance, transport constraints, household responsibilities, gender norms and academic difficulties to shape patterns of educational discontinuation. Parental encouragement, school support and government schemes may partially buffer these pressures but cannot necessarily eliminate them. Economic and spatial factors do not exhaust the explanation. Academic difficulties can contribute to disengagement,

particularly when students lack remedial support or struggle with increasing curriculum demands. Existing research shows that poor academic performance, attendance, inadequate academic support, feedback and motivation can contribute to dropout (Dhungana, 2025; Yusof et al., 2023; Casanova et al., 2018; Paura & Arhipova, 2014). Evidence from Udalguri suggests that academic factors are present but secondary to economic and accessibility barriers (Kumar et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024; Dhungana, 2025).

By integrating evidence on economic vulnerability, parental education, gender norms and spatial accessibility within a single rural district in North-East India, this study contributes to the dropout literature in three ways. First, it shifts the focus from enrolment to stage-specific retention, highlighting the upper-primary transition as a critical point of educational discontinuation in a socio-economically and ethnically diverse setting. Second, it demonstrates that high levels of parental encouragement and assistance do not necessarily translate into continued schooling when structural constraints remain unaddressed, thereby complicating narratives that attribute dropout primarily to low parental commitment. Third, it provides context-specific evidence from Udalguri, a district that has received limited attention in the school dropout literature, and thus extends existing Indian and South Asian studies that are often concentrated in other regions (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Mahanta et al., 2025; Reddy & Sinha, 2010).

2. Methodology

Design: The study used a descriptive, exploratory cross-sectional design to examine school dropout and the circumstances surrounding it at a single point in time. It relied on quantitative data gathered through structured schedules.

Participants/Sample: The study covered 40 dropout students, 40 currently enrolled students, 20 teachers, and 30 parents/guardians. Dropout students were identified through school records

and local community contacts. They were included only if they had left school before completing their last enrolled stage and were still living in the study area during data collection. The currently enrolled students were drawn from the same schools and classes from which the dropout students had exited, so that the comparison would remain meaningful. Teachers and parents/guardians were selected from the same schools and surrounding communities, depending on their willingness and availability. Since the sample was small and selected non-randomly, the findings are best understood as reflecting the local context rather than as estimates for a larger population.

Instruments: Data were collected with separate structured schedules prepared for dropout students, currently enrolled students, teachers, and parents/guardians. These schedules covered respondent background, schooling experience, reasons for dropout, school conditions, and views on government support.

Procedure: The study was carried out in Udalguri district of Assam, a setting chosen because it combines rural and tea-garden areas, social diversity, and varying household economic conditions. After identifying the dropout students through school records and community contacts, the researchers approached the currently enrolled students from the same schools and classes. Teachers and parents/guardians were then contacted through the same schools and nearby communities. The information gathered through the schedules was organized and prepared for analysis in line with the study objectives.

Data Analysis: The responses were analysed using frequencies and percentages to describe the background of respondents, patterns of schooling, reported reasons for dropout, school conditions, and perceptions of government support. Cross-tabulations were used to see how dropout-related factors varied by gender, community, family type, parental education, parental occupation, and household income.

3. Results

3.1 Socio-demographic profiles of dropout and currently enrolled students

Table 1 compares the socio-demographic

characteristics of school dropout respondents and currently enrolled students.

Table 1 Demographic and socio-economic profiles of dropout respondents and currently enrolled students

Characteristic	Category	Dropout (%)	respondent	Currently enrolled student (%)
Age	Below 16 years	17.5		100
	16–21 years	60.0		-
	Above 21 years	22.5		-
Gender	Male	55.0		17.5
	Female	45.0		82.5
Community	ST	42.5		52.5
	General	57.5		17.0
	OBC	-		30.5
Type of family	Nuclear	75.0		77.5
	Joint	25.0		22.5
Father's education	Illiterate	67.5		15.0
	Primary	22.5		62.5
	HSLC	10.0		22.5
Mother's education	Illiterate	87.5		17.5
	Primary	12.5		52.5
	HSLC	-		30.0
Father's occupation	Farmer	20.0		55.0
	Daily wage labourer	65.0		35.0
	Tea-garden worker	2.5		10.0

Mother's occupation	Business	12.5	-
	Homemaker	40.0	82.5
	Farmer	2.5	5.0
	Tea-garden worker	47.5	2.5
	Daily wage labourer	10.0	10.0
Annual family income	Below ₹50,000	82.5	60.0
	₹50,000–₹1,00,000	17.5	40.0

Source: Field Study, 2026

Dropout respondents were predominantly aged 16–21 years (60.0%), whereas all currently enrolled students were below 16 years. Males constituted a higher proportion of dropout respondents (55.0%) than females (45.0%), while among currently enrolled students 17.5% were male and 82.5% were female. General-category students formed the majority of dropout respondents (57.5%), whereas currently enrolled students were mostly from ST (52.5%) and OBC (30.5%) backgrounds. Parental education and occupation indicated greater disadvantage among dropout households: 67.5% of fathers and 87.5% of mothers of dropout respondents were illiterate, and most fathers were daily wage

labourers (65.0%). Annual family income below ₹50,000 was reported by 82.5% of dropout households and 60.0% of households of currently enrolled students. These patterns suggest that while both groups are economically vulnerable, the dropout group is characterised by lower parental education and greater dependence on precarious wage and tea-garden work.

3.2 Reported causes of dropout: convergent and divergent perspectives

Table 2 presents the factors associated with school dropout as reported by dropout respondents, parents and teachers.

Table 2 Reported causes of school dropout from dropout, parent and teacher perspectives

Reported factor	Dropout respondents(%) n = 40	Parents (%) n = 30	Teachers (%) n = 20
Financial difficulty	95.0	80.0	70.0
Long distance to school	45.0	40.0	25.0
Household responsibilities	20.0	3.3	25.0
Need to support family income/work	12.5	—	—
Migration/seasonal work	—	6.7	—
Poor academic performance	10.0	—	30.0
Early marriage	7.5	6.7	25.0

Lack of parental support	—	—	60.0
Lack of interest in studies	5.0	—	—
Other reasons	—	33.3	5.0

Note

. Multiple responses were permitted; percentages do not sum to 100

Source: Field Study, 2026

Financial difficulty was the most commonly reported factor across all three groups: 95.0% of dropout respondents, 80.0% of parents and 70.0% of teachers. Long distance to school was identified by 45.0% of dropout respondents, 40.0% of parents and 25.0% of teachers. Household responsibilities were reported by 20.0% of dropout respondents and 25.0% of teachers, but by only 3.3% of parents. These patterns indicate that economic constraints and geographical accessibility constitute major barriers to the continuation of schooling. In contrast, poor academic performance was

reported by 10.0% of dropout respondents and 30.0% of teachers, suggesting that academic difficulties may be more visible from the school's perspective. Early marriage was reported by 7.5% of dropout respondents, 6.7% of parents and 25.0% of teachers, while lack of parental support was identified only by teachers (60.0%). Lack of interest in studies (5.0%) and migration or seasonal work (6.7% of parents) were less frequently reported. Overall, economic hardship clearly dominates academic disengagement, although disinterest and poor performance are present for a minority of students.

3.3 Differentiated vulnerabilities: gender, community and family

Table 3 Selected reported dropout factors by gender, community and family type among dropout respondents

Reported factor	Male (n = 22)	Female (n = 18)	ST (n = 17)	General (n = 23)	Nuclear (n = 30)	Joint (n = 10)
Financial difficulty	95.5	94.4	94.1	95.7	96.7	90.0
Long distance to school	40.9	50.0	64.7	30.4	43.3	50.0
Household responsibilities	9.1	33.3	0.0	34.8	20.0	20.0

Need to support family income/work	18.2	5.6	5.9	17.4	13.3	10.0
Poor academic performance	18.2	0.0	23.5	0.0	10.0	10.0
Early marriage	0.0	16.7	0.0	13.0	6.7	10.0

Source: Field Study, 2026

Financial difficulty was the most commonly reported reason for dropout across all sub-groups, indicating that economic constraint operates as a pervasive, structural driver of dropout irrespective of gender, community or family structure. Long distance to school showed marked variation by community and gender. It was reported by 64.7% of ST respondents compared to 30.4% of General-category respondents, suggesting locational disadvantage for ST habitations. By gender, it was reported by 50.0% of female respondents compared to 40.9% of male respondents. Household responsibilities revealed a gendered pattern: 33.3% of female respondents compared to 9.1% of male respondents. By community, no ST respondent

reported this factor, while 34.8% of General-category respondents did. The need to support family income or work was higher among male respondents (18.2% vs 5.6%) and higher among General-category respondents (17.4% vs 5.9%). Poor academic performance was reported by 18.2% of male respondents and 23.5% of ST respondents, but by none of the female and General-category respondents. Early marriage was reported exclusively by female respondents (16.7%) and by 13.0% of General-category respondents, but by no ST respondents. These patterns indicate that while economic hardship is broadly shared, its interaction with gender, community and family structure produces differentiated pathways into dropout.

3.4 School conditions, family support and government assistance

Table 4 School conditions, family support and government assistance from student, teacher and parent perspectives

Domain	Indicator	Respondent group	%
Access	Students travelling more than 5 km to school	Current students	10.0
Attendance	Students reporting frequent absence	Current students	55.0

Learning environment	Teaching rated good or very good	Current students	92.5
	Inadequate learning materials		25.0
	Classroom space adequate	Teachers	95.0
	Teaching-learning materials inadequate		30.0
	Infrastructure inadequate		30.0
Family support	Parents encourage education	Current students	95.0
	Parents help with studies		100.0
	Parents encourage regular study	Parents/guardians	100.0
	Teachers citing lack of parental support as a dropout factor	Teachers	60.0
Government support	Mid-day meals received	Current students	100.0
	Free textbooks received		100.0
	Uniforms received		100.0
	Scholarships received		62.5
	Parents aware of schemes	Parents/guardians	93.3
	Parents reporting schemes helped retention		66.7
	Teachers rating schemes effective or very effective	Teachers	85.0
At-risk support	Teachers providing special support to at-risk students		85.0

Source: Field Study, 2026

Under school access and attendance, 10.0% of current students reported travelling more than 5 km to reach school, while 55.0% reported frequent absence. This suggests that attendance-related challenges may be more significant than physical access alone. With regard to the learning environment, 92.5% of current students rated teaching as good or very good, while 25.0% reported inadequate learning materials. From the teachers' perspective, 95.0% considered classroom space adequate, while 30.0% reported inadequacy of teaching-learning materials and infrastructure. The findings suggest that although teaching quality and physical classroom space are largely perceived positively, shortages of learning resources remain an area requiring attention.

Family support appears strong among current students and parents: 95.0% of current students reported parental encouragement, 100.0% reported help with studies, and 100.0% of parents reported encouraging regular study. However,

.3.5 Stage and duration of dropout

60.0% of teachers identified lack of parental support as a dropout factor. This difference suggests that parental support may not be uniform across all families, particularly among students who are vulnerable to discontinuing their education.

Regarding government support, all current students reported receiving mid-day meals, free textbooks and uniforms, while scholarships were received by 62.5%. Among parents, 93.3% were aware of government schemes and 66.7% reported that these schemes had helped in retaining their children. Teachers rated schemes as effective or very effective (85.0%). Finally, 85.0% of teachers reported that their schools provide special support to students at risk of dropping out. These findings indicate substantial coverage of basic support, but also room for strengthening targeted and systematic retention measures

Table 5 Stage and duration of dropout

Dimension	Category	Percentage
Last level attended	Primary	10.0%
	Upper primary	40.0%
	High school	30.0%
	Higher secondary	20.0%
Duration out of school	Within 1 year	2.5%
	1–3 years	40.0%
	More than 3 years	57.5%

Source: Field Study, 2026

Table 5 illustrates the educational stage at which respondents discontinued schooling and the duration for which they have remained out of school. Dropout was more pronounced at the upper-primary and high-school stages than at the primary level: 40.0% of respondents had attended up to upper primary, 30.0% had reached high school, 20.0% higher secondary and only 10.0% primary. This pattern suggests that the transition

from primary to upper-primary and subsequently to secondary education represents a particularly vulnerable period for educational retention. The duration of school discontinuation further indicates that dropout is not merely a short-term interruption: 57.5% of respondents had remained out of school for more than three years, 40.0% for one to three years and only 2.5% within the previous year. Thus, the majority of dropout respondents had experienced long-term disengagement from formal education, which

may substantially reduce the likelihood of returning to school.

4. Discussion

The findings show that school dropout in Udalguri is not the result of a single cause, but of several pressures that accumulate over time. Economic vulnerability emerged as the strongest underlying factor, while distance to school, household responsibilities, gender norms, parental education, and institutional conditions shaped how that vulnerability affected different students (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2021; Reddy & Sinha, 2010). This directly supports the study's objective of examining dropout as a multidimensional process rather than as a simple matter of student interest or motivation. Financial difficulty was the most frequently reported reason for dropout, which is consistent with previous research showing that poverty affects schooling through direct costs, opportunity costs, and insecure livelihoods (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024; Parreño, 2019). The concentration of dropout at the upper-primary, high-school, and higher-secondary stages suggests that educational transition points are especially vulnerable, particularly for families with unstable earnings such as daily wage and tea-garden households (Ministry of Education, 2024; Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014). This pattern is consistent with earlier findings that household poverty and parental education are key predictors of discontinuation (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Haryani, 2022). Distance to school was another major barrier, especially for ST respondents and female respondents. This confirms that access is not only about whether a school exists, but also about how far it is, how safely children can reach it, and whether transport is available (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2024; Mahanta et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2023; Parreño, 2019). The fact that dropout was concentrated at higher stages strengthens the argument that transition points are critical

moments when spatial barriers become more decisive, particularly for children living in remote areas (Ministry of Education, 2024; Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Mahanta et al., 2025).

The gendered and community-specific patterns in the findings suggest that dropout is experienced differently across social groups. Household responsibilities and early marriage were more prominent among girls, while boys were more likely to leave school to support family income or work. These differences reflect broader social expectations in rural India and show why retention policies must be gender-responsive rather than uniform (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Parreño, 2019). Community differences also indicate that ST children face stronger spatial barriers, while some General-category households experience more pressure related to work, domestic responsibilities, and early marriage (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Mahanta et al., 2025). The relatively strong parental encouragement reported by currently enrolled students, together with teachers' view that parental support is weak in some dropout cases, suggests that parental attitude alone does not determine continuation. Good intentions may exist, but they are often not enough to overcome poverty, distance, and household pressures (Paul et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2023; Haryani, 2022). Similarly, the wide coverage of midday meals, textbooks, uniforms, and scholarships shows that support schemes are reaching many students, but their presence has not been sufficient to prevent dropout where livelihood insecurity and access problems remain strong (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2021; Reddy & Sinha, 2010). Academic difficulties do matter, but they appear secondary to economic and accessibility barriers in this setting. This is consistent with earlier studies showing that poor academic performance, irregular attendance, and weak support can contribute to dropout, especially when students are already under pressure from household and livelihood

conditions (Dhungana, 2025; Yusof et al., 2023; Casanova et al., 2018; Paura & Arhipova, 2014). In practical terms, the findings suggest that schools need stronger early-warning systems, better follow-up of irregular students, and support measures that are sensitive to the realities of rural households.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. This study relies on self-reported reasons for dropout, so responses may be shaped by recall error or social desirability. The sample sizes for teachers and parents are relatively small, which limits generalisation beyond the study area. Because the study is cross-sectional, it cannot establish causal sequences, only patterns and associations. The currently enrolled group is also younger than the dropout group, which may affect direct comparison because of cohort differences. Even with these limitations, the study offers important policy direction. It points to the need for transport support, residential support near transition points, livelihood-sensitive retention measures for poor households, gender-responsive interventions to address domestic labour and early marriage, and bridging or re-entry programmes for adolescents who have been out of school for several years (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024; Mahanta et al., 2025; Parreño, 2019; Reddy & Sinha, 2010; Dhungana, 2025). By focusing on retention in a rural and socially diverse district of North-East India, the study adds context-specific evidence to a literature that has often given more attention to enrolment than to completion (Banik & Neogi, 2015; Gouda & Sekher, 2014; Kumar et al., 2023; Mahanta et al., 2025; Reddy & Sinha, 2010).

5. Conclusion

This study shows that school dropout in Udalguri is driven mainly by structural economic and spatial constraints rather than by individual disinterest or weak parental commitment. Financial difficulty, long distance to school, and

the way poverty intersects with gendered and community-specific pressures emerged as the main pathways to educational exclusion, especially at the upper-primary and secondary stages where the costs and opportunity costs of schooling rise most sharply. The findings also suggest that parental encouragement and government entitlements, while important, are not sufficient on their own when households face livelihood insecurity, geographical barriers, and gendered expectations around domestic labour and early marriage. Effective retention strategies therefore need to go beyond universal provisioning and focus on targeted, transition-sensitive interventions. These should include transport and residential support for ST and remote habitations, livelihood-sensitive cash or in-kind assistance during lean periods, gender-responsive measures addressing safety, mobility, and marriage timing, and systematic school-level early-warning and bridging programmes for adolescents who have already dropped out. Future research could use longitudinal and qualitative designs to trace the sequence of economic shocks, attendance decline, performance drops, and eventual dropout, as well as to better understand gendered roles, marriage timing, and negotiations with schools. Comparative studies across different rural livelihood zones, such as tea-garden and non-tea-garden or tribal and non-tribal blocks, would also help identify more context-specific retention strategies. By focusing on stage-specific retention in a socio-economically and ethnically diverse rural district in North-East India, this study adds to existing Indian and South Asian dropout literature, which has often focused more on enrolment than on completion. Ultimately, reducing dropout in Udalguri and similar settings requires policies that treat education not only as a service to be accessed, but as a capability that must be actively sustained against the cumulative pressures of poverty, distance, labour, and social norms.

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7. Author Declaration

The authors declare that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere or submitted for publication in any other form. The authors also declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.