

Need of Academic Reform in Higher Education: A Study with Reference to Chirang District of Assam

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Abstract

Academic activities are the central activities of an area around which other activities should revolve, but unfortunately in our land academics is often held subservient to the political issues making academics a soft casualty. Among the districts in Assam, Chirang invariably finds itself at the bottom of the list in terms of academic performance. Chirang is a new district in Bodoland Territorial Council which was created in 2004. Chirang district is deemed one of the most backward districts educationally. Being a new district, it naturally lags behind in terms of education as compared to most other districts in Assam. Another factor for poor academic performance in the district is fewer higher educational institutions than those in the other districts of Assam. The socio-political situation is equally responsible for the poor academic performance in the district. The frequent ethnic clashes in the district also merit a mention in this context. It is worth mentioning that during calamities, some of the educational institutions in the district did suffer due to the fact that those institutions were being used as relief camps for the homeless victims of the ethnic clash. In this paper therefore, an attempt has been made to explore how academic atmosphere suffers due to social and political factors, and accordingly, has provided suggestions to eradicate them to develop the scenario of higher education in the district of Chirang in Assam.

Key words: academics, subservient, ethnic-clash, socio-political, calamity.

Introduction

Academic activities in an area should ideally find primacy over other trivial issues, but unfortunately in our land academics is often held hostage to the politics-bred issues leading academics to being a soft casualty. Among the districts in Assam Chirang invariably ranks at the bottom of the list in terms of academic performance.

Chirang is a new district in the Bodoland Territorial Council which was created in 2004. Chirang district is deemed one of the most backward districts educationally. As it is a new district, it is lagging behind in terms of education as compared to some of the other districts in Assam. Another factor for poor academic performance in the district is fewer higher educational institutions than those in the other districts of Assam. The socio-political situation is also equally responsible for the poor academic performance in the district. The recent ethnic clash in the district along with some other districts in the state of Assam also merits a mention in this context. It is worth mentioning that till recently, some of the educational institutions in the district did suffer due to the fact that those institutions were being used as relief camps for the homeless victims of the recent ethnic clash. So a study was undertaken with a view to exploring the academic status quo in the district.

Objectives Of The Study

To examine the academic status quo in the district

To explore factors leading to the academic problems in the district.

To relate the socio-political situation of the district to its academic status. To explore the need of academic reform in the district.

Methodology

Descriptive survey method has been used in the present study to collect data and information. Colleges and higher secondary schools in the district were surveyed in the study. Questionnaires were distributed to 50 teachers of those institutions for collecting data.

Some Academic and Socio-Political Issues in Chirang District

Examination system in India instead of acting as a fillip to students' growth has invariably proved counterproductive to the growth of students' knowledge and skills. An average student in India passes most examination papers depending on his memory strength which does not in any case develop his knowledge and skill because the day the examinations are over, he/she forgets everything. Question setters in India by and large set some questions which can be well predicted by students on going through preceding five years' question papers. So what a large number of students do is that they select some questions, memorise them and pass the examinations. Therefore there is little motivation on the part of the students to build the thought process from the beginning which has a negative impact on a student's future.

A reference to the basic schooling is inevitable while discussing problems in academics. There is no uniformity in schools all over the country with regard to the facilities offered to students especially with regard to language policy. At the moment there are two types of schools running parallel in India - the elite English medium schools meant for the rich and the schools in the vernacular medium including Hindi meant for the poor people. English medium students are far better equipped than their vernacular medium counterparts as far as the English language is concerned. As higher education has to be carried out in English and as most books are written in English, the English medium students are better placed in terms of knowledge acquisition.

There is an issue with syllabus designing as well. A poem like *The Hollow Men* does not serve any purpose to somebody who majors in subjects like political science or education. What an education major student needs is the basic English language skills which poems like *The Hollow Men* or *The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock* are not going to give. But this was exactly the case a few years ago and still the case to some extent.

It is also not clear what the question setters in Gauhati University are going to achieve by setting objective type questions in English major papers. One of the objectives of offering English major is to foster creativity of the students, so it defies all logic as to how objective type questions are going to foster somebody's creativity. It is shocking to find 'fill in the blank' or 'true false' type questions in English major papers.

In our education system there is no one to one correspondence between examination result and knowledge. A student on his memory strength may easily get 60% marks but how much this translates into knowledge is a doubtful proposition. At present there are some mushrooming junior and senior private colleges whose authorities or owners compel the teachers to give notes to students on a wholesale basis because they want all their students to get first class, so that they get more enrolments next session, which undoubtedly pay some dividends on the short term but on a long term it can be counterproductive.

Another problem with our examination system is that it is totally theory based, there is no project orientation. Projects create interest among the students besides removing monotony of the theoretical studies. This is one of the reasons why college students in our part of the country are poor in acquisition of the English language skills. For example, besides teaching the standard pronunciation to our students if they are given a project to find out how our cricketers, politicians or newsreaders speak the English language, this will reinforce their theoretical base of the language with real practical skills.

Knowledge and skill are two different things. After completing master degree a person gets knowledge, but how to transfer his knowledge to the students is a skill which the teacher does not have as there are no training facilities at the entry level in colleges. This befuddles the teachers especially a new language teacher as teaching language is not only about imparting knowledge but imparting skills unlike in subjects like political science.

Besides training facilities for language teachers, one needs to touch upon the idea of the English language per se as a skill subject besides being a knowledge subject. For practical execution of any language including English one needs training in phonetics and needs to imbibe those skills. But unfortunately there are neither those training facilities in our colleges nor the realisation that language is a skill.

Our academic system has always centred around bookish and traditional ideas. Innovative ideas on the part of students are hardly tolerated by the examiners as they are themselves product of the same system. Normally the examiners are more satisfied with bookish stereotyped answers than novel substantiated ideas. As a result there are very few innovative and original minds that the system can boast of, if there are any, then they are just accidental and by-products of the system.

Our system allows marks to have greater say over efficiency to fetch most jobs. The so called meritorious person here is someone who has greater marks and not greater knowledge or efficiency. If a person gets job on the basis of marks we say that he got it on merit. The real irony is if the marks do not reflect one's knowledge or efficiency how can one say that the job was got on merit. Therefore one needs to have a relook at the definition of merit and its applicability.

All the educational institutions in the Chirang district did not have any academic activity for a period of one month immediately following the summer vacation in the year when the violence took place between two ethnic groups.

Analysis of Data and Findings of the Study

As part of the process of collecting data from the respondents, questionnaires were distributed to college teachers and academics. Besides, direct data were collected from the office of inspector of schools in Chirang district. The data collected through questionnaires and interviews from the respondents as well as data collected from the relevant office throw ample light on various aspects of the academic scenario of the district and the same have been analysed below.

87% students resort to rote learning when it comes to writing answers in the examination. 93% students depend on readymade bazaar notes for writing answers in examinations.

72% teachers do not find the education system conducive to development of originality and skills.

93% teachers feel that the present examination system has no role in providing students' real knowledge and efficiency.

All teachers interviewed believe that creativity in writing answers should be preferred to memory based reproduction.

All teachers believe that the bazaar notes impair students' ability to creativity.

97% teachers in the district feel that the poor performance of the schools is responsible for their poor academic performance in higher education.

99% teachers believe that the void created in schools cannot be made up in colleges. 74% teachers endorse remedial English classes in college level.

Most general classes in colleges were overcrowded which do not allow the teachers to teach effectively and it prevents both interaction as well as individual attention.

There is no advanced language materials in any of the colleges surveyed to boost the English language skills of students

The English medium students speak and write English better as compared to their vernacular medium counterparts.

The ghost of examination haunts not only the students but the teachers who feel pressurised to finish their allotted portion of the course as their main preoccupation seems to be to prepare students to pass the examination rather than prepare them for the future life.

Vocational courses were not found being offered in any of the higher educational institutions surveyed. Suggestions

On the basis of the present study the following suggestions are forwarded which may remove the loopholes with regard to the academic scenario in the district

Creativity in English answers should be encouraged by the examiners more than the memory based reproduction, e.g. students can be asked to compose on certain topics.

Remedial English classes should be arranged for the weaker students.

Examination system should be more practically oriented like home assignments, projects, etc.

Seminars and group discussions, etc. should be regularly held and made compulsory for all students in colleges.

Transition of all vernacular medium schools into English mediums can be given a thought after due deliberation because then it will present a uniform picture as far as schooling is concerned.

Number of students in a class should be minimised so as to facilitate interaction. Language materials such as language laboratory should be made available in colleges.

Teaching should not only aim at good performance in examinations but it should aim at development of knowledge and efficiency which could come in handy in real life situation.

Vocational education should be part of the curriculum.

There should be uniformity and homogeneity as far as schooling is concerned. Number of higher educational institutions in the district should be increased.

The educational institutions should not be used as relief camps and other political activities.

Conclusion

The present study has focused itself on an assessment of the academic scenario in Chirang district of Bodoland Territorial Council of Assam. To achieve this purpose a field work has been conducted and the findings as put down in this paper throw ample light in the state of affairs with regard to the academic status in the district. One striking highlight of the study is that the district has much fewer higher educational institutions as compared to other districts and the recent ethnic violence in the district has a toll on the academic activities in the current academic session. The district was already lagging behind educationally which was striving hard to catch up with the other districts, adding to its woes further is the socio-political situation dampening the academic atmosphere largely. Therefore, much needs to be done both on academic as well as socio-political fronts for the district to do a catching up with the other districts.

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