



# Being Urban: The Bane of English Learning in the Assamese Medium Schools of Kamrup (Metro)

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**Abstract:** *There is no gainsaying the fact that urbanization and development go hand in hand in almost all matters of civilization and progress commensurate with the social and economic aspirations of a nation. It is expected, therefore, that the prospect of education too would relatively speaking, be much advanced in the urban set up as compared to its rural counterpart. And to a respectable degree, this seems to be quite true in the context of higher education in consonance with predictable notions. Yet when it comes to the plight of vernacular medium schools urbanization itself poses the most serious threat to their growth and development. Although the problem is peculiar to all vernacular medium schools of the country this paper seeks to argue with particular reference to the Assamese medium schools of Kamrup (Metro) district that the fact of urbanization itself becomes a curse for learning English for the students of these institutions owing to the monumental neglect to which they are subjected -- basically again, because of the elitist mindset of those in the corridors of power on the one hand and the elevated aspirations of parents on the other, who wish to witness their children climb up the ladder of social success.*

**Keywords:** *English, urban, rural, vernacular, Assamese, Kamrup (Metro), medium*

It is common knowledge that urbanization of any geographical area has advantages that far surpass and outweigh the rural benefits, however naturally salubrious they might be. It is true that relatively speaking, the blessings of nature in their myriad forms remain a trifle unaffected in the rural conditions as compared to their urban presence. But, almost in all other sectors of human concerns – social, economic, political et al, the urban stands far too privileged over the rural. From road communication to internet facilities, health services to commercial prospects, education to employment generation to industrialization, the urban advantages stand way above their rural counterparts. In matters of education, especially, the rural situation is extremely deplorable. From educational institutions of repute to network facilities to libraries to book shops, the urban advantage simply does not leave any scope for its corresponding rural entities to merit any comparison with it. In short, in terms of the growth and development of education, the urban, beyond an iota

of doubt, remains perpetually advantaged. Yet, there are hidden issues and elements within the urban framework that serve to impede and stifle the progress of education in numerous ways. And it is the vernacular medium schools situated within urban zones that are worst hit by the tactical designs of progressive modernization. This paper, therefore, sets out to argue as to how the fact of being urban becomes a veritable bane for learning English for students pursuing education in the Assamese medium schools of Kamrup (Metro).

Urbanization, for all practical purposes, is universally acknowledged to be the hallmark of progress and development. And truly speaking, urbanization does come with its baggage of palpable benefits. Obviously, therefore, it would seem preposterous to state that being urban could have any deterrent effect on an educational institution. But, that, sadly enough, is the reality being faced by the Assamese medium schools of Kamrup (Metro). It is indeed true that Kamrup (Metro) happens to be the central hub of education in the context not only of Assam but of the entire northeast region of India. Students from different districts of Assam and her neighbouring states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland Tripura, Sikkim flock to Guwahati, the capital of Assam and the nerve centre of Kamrup (Metro), every year in pursuit of quality education. Now, while higher education institutions like colleges and universities enjoying state patronage certainly are among the best here, school education right from the pre-primary to the higher secondary level are in the hands of private players. Most of these institutions offer state of the art facilities in the form of class rooms, libraries, sports and games and most importantly, teachers capable of delivering what is expected of them. But the medium of instruction in all these schools is English, the language, as it were, of opportunity. And it goes without saying that these institutions are the choice of all parents. More so, if they happen to be situated in urban areas For it is a common belief among parents almost in the entire country itself that the future of education lies through English medium schools only. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India himself, for instance, declares in this regard:

“.....for an indefinite period.....I would have English as an associate, additional language.....because I do not wish the people of non-Hindi areas to feel that certain doors of advance are closed to them ” (Krishnaswamy Lalitha, and N. Krishnaswamy. *ELTI Journal*, 6 Mar 2012).

Consequently, in spite of the exorbitant fee charged by these schools parents prefer them to their vernacular counterparts for their wards and children. It is even seen that parents who are relatively speaking, economically handicapped go to the extent of taking huge loans mortgaging their land and property. And the prime factor that drives parents to prefer the English medium schools is the belief that that their children would master the English language which, especially in India, is the key to success and fame. It is only those parents who are incapable of sending their children to the English medium schools because of economic factors feel constrained to put their children in the vernacular medium schools. Not that there are no

exceptions. But majority of the students of vernacular medium schools happen to come from economically challenged backgrounds. This sad truth applies to the Assamese medium schools of Kamrup (Metro) as well. It is even said that many of the students come here not necessarily for learning but for the mid day meal being served here.

Under the circumstances, it becomes a herculean task to motivate such students towards learning itself, not to speak of egging them on to pursue English. In the context of Kamrup (Metro), therefore, it is felt all the more acutely that the factor of urbanization has turned into a kind of bane for the Assamese medium schools located here.

In spite of the Government announcing all kinds of welfare schemes students in these schools do not feel encouraged enough to take the business of learning seriously. This in turn has its cumulative effect on the teachers. As students in these schools are apparently more worried about their bread than brains teachers too do not feel inspired to teach with the kind of dedication their rivals in the private English medium schools are seen to be doing. As has been already suggested economy certainly plays a big role in the matter of the urban Assamese school. With the passage of time it has become more the rule than exception for the teachers belonging to Assamese medium schools of Kamrup (Metro), in the same way as their equivalents in other urban centres of the country, to shy away from their responsibilities as parents and guardians of the children of these schools hardly have the courage or the inclination to approach the teachers with any complaint or query whatsoever relating to the performance, progress or failure of students. As R. L. Mehta observes:

A teacher with the qualities of the imagination, invention and ability to secure and maintain pupils' interest will find something to stimulate them, but those who come to teaching as a last resort will find themselves blackballed. (Mehta 1950:357)

Unfortunately, none of the attributes of “imagination, invention and ability” is to be seen in the teachers of the Assamese medium schools of the Kamrup (Metro) district. Consequently, although these schools are in urban areas, students do not enjoy the kind of benefits their fellow students from private schools are blessed with owing primarily to their poor parental backgrounds.

While the private English medium students are constantly under the scrutinizing eyes of their teachers in school and the nagging concerns of their parents at home the vernacular medium school students have none to care for their future either at home or in the school. Consequently, these students remain pathetically unaware of their responsibilities relating to their educational goals. In fact, so casual is their attitude towards

the business of education itself that teaching English becomes a far cry. This, however, is not true of the village schools of Assam although the medium of instruction continues to be Assamese here too. For students come here not necessarily out of economic compulsion but by choice as teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the future of the students. Ironically, the English medium private schools that are beginning to make inroads here as well lag much behind in terms of performance as they lack the services of experienced and dedicated teachers of the government schools on the one hand and bright and hardworking students on the other. Not that there are no erring teachers and truants here, but their number is far less than those of the Assamese medium government schools of the Kamrup (Metro) district. As a matter of fact, it becomes quite transparent that the fact of urbanization itself becomes an impediment for the Assamese medium schools of the Kamrup(Metro) district insofar as the teaching—learning aspect is concerned, particularly of the English language. Now, with regard to the learning of English it goes without saying that one the most fundamental requirements of learning a language is the frequency of its use. That is to say that if a language is to be mastered it must be practiced again and again until it becomes a habit.

“Language learning is a habit forming process and constant and accurate practice is the basis of habit formation”. (Palmer,Redman: 1968:39)

But the sad truth is neither the teachers address the students in English even in the English class at the secondary stage -- not to speak of junior levels – nor do students themselves feel encouraged to speak in English. While the students are blissfully indifferent to what is being taught in the classroom, the teachers in their bid to prove their sense of duty happily venture forth to explain even the English text in Assamese. As a result, forget speaking in English in the school campus becoming a habit for students, the prospect even of acquiring some fundamental knowledge of English remains a far cry for the students.

Added to the general indifference towards learning is the malady called “grace marks” which allows candidates not securing even the required marks to pass the annual examination to be promoted to the next higher class. This practice of allotting “grace marks” is doing more harm than good to students not quite serious about learning. The phenomenon is hugely responsible for inculcating a sense of misplaced complacency and irresponsibility in the minds of students from the Assamese medium schools, especially, in the Kamrup (Metro) district where no children of parents belonging to the corridors of power ever come to be admitted. Moreover, with the mushrooming of English medium schools in the district so much as even the existence of provincialised Assamese medium schools is not taken cognizance of. Paradoxically, the teachers of these schools do not admit their own children here as they are remarkably aware of the abominable state of affairs persisting in the squalid labyrinths of neglect and dispassion here. Honestly speaking, an atmosphere of pitiable disinterestedness prevails in these schools owing essentially to the twain factors of government indifference and parental ignorance. The attitude towards learning itself on the part of

the students being so deplorable the teaching of English becomes quite an uphill task here as students belonging to these schools have no exposure whatsoever to the language beyond the confines of the classroom, which, by itself is subject to interrogation.

Human nature being whatever it is will always look for opportunities and advantages in the areas that matter. As such, the English language, as already stated, has been seen throughout the ages as a key to the world of opportunities. Rightly, therefore, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC), 2009 report underlines the importance of English thus:

An understanding of and command over the English language is the most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School-leavers who are not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a handicap in the world of higher education. More often than not, teaching is in English. Even if it is not, in most subjects, books and journals are available only in English. And those who do not know English well enough find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in our premier educational institutions.

Most of the students studying in Assamese medium schools in Kamrup (Metro) district feel increasingly isolated and look upon the fact of urbanization itself as responsible for their failure to integrate with the national crowd and aspiration. What should have been a boon, therefore, turns out to be a bane for the Assamese medium schools of the district as their interests seem to be nobody's business and consequently do not figure in the list of governmental priorities. In other words, the kind of elitist culture that automatically comes to influence the minds of urban parents where the medium of the school to which they send their children play a seminal role in determining their status much to the detriment conversely of the vernacular medium schools. This is a matter that needs to be taken seriously by the people at the helm of affairs. They need to realize that the qualities of discipline, surveillance, academic rigor, involvement and an overall sense of belonging -- the characteristic traits of the private English medium schools -- must necessarily come to replace the nonchalant, non-caring and irresponsible attitude of both the learning and teaching communities of the Assamese medium schools of the district under consideration. Most importantly, the authorities concerned should take appropriate measures to encourage the teaching-learning of English in these schools in a way that the learners here read, write and speak English with the same degree of fluency as their English medium counterparts. For nothing would be more rewarding for parents than to see their children acquire the mastery and command over the English language -- the language that holds the key to infinite possibilities. Should the authorities stop patronizing the private English medium schools of the district both in terms of finance and enrolment there certainly would be a drastic change for good for the Assamese medium schools of the state in general and of Kamrup (metro) district in particular. Otherwise, the vernacular medium schools would continue to exist only as a source of colossal waste stirring the state coffers to bleed dry.

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