

Socio-Economic Effects of the Fee Waiver Scheme at Barkhetri College, Narayanpur, Mukalmua, Assam

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Abstract:

Access to higher education in rural Assam remains significantly influenced by household poverty, agrarian instability, and structural inequality. This study examines the socio-economic implications of the Government of Assam's Fee Waiver Scheme at Barkhetri College in Nalbari district of Assam. Drawing on Sen's capability approach and literature on higher education financing, the paper evaluates whether the scheme has enhanced educational access, reduced financial stress, and promoted inclusive participation among economically disadvantaged students. A mixed-method research design was employed using primary survey data and institutional records from 2021–2023. The findings indicate that the scheme has substantially increased enrolment and retention among vulnerable groups, improved gender parity, and contributed to broader social outcomes such as delayed marriage, enhanced political awareness, and increased participation in cultural and sports activities. However, the high proportion of beneficiaries also reflects persistent rural poverty and structural economic fragility. The study concludes that while fee waivers promote inclusion, complementary structural reforms are necessary for sustainable socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: Fee waiver, higher education, rural poverty, capability approach, Assam, educational inclusion.

1. Introduction

Higher education is widely recognized as a catalyst for economic mobility, human capital development, and social transformation. It enhances productive capacity and contributes to reducing long-term inequality (Becker, 1993; Tilak, 2015). From the perspective of the capability approach, education expands substantive freedoms by enabling individuals to pursue valued life trajectories (Sen, 1999).

Despite expansion in India's higher education sector, participation remains uneven. Students from rural and economically weaker households face both direct costs (tuition and admission fees) and indirect costs (transportation, study materials, and opportunity costs), which often discourage continuation beyond secondary education (World Bank, 2018). In agrarian districts such as Nalbari in Assam, income instability caused by small landholdings, seasonal employment, and flood vulnerability intensifies these constraints.

To address financial exclusion, the Government of Assam introduced the Fee Waiver Scheme for students from economically weaker sections enrolled in provincialised colleges (Government of Assam, 2020). This study assesses the socio-economic impact of the scheme at Barkhetri College.

2. Statement of the Problem

Although public policies aim to widen participation in higher education, disparities persist in rural Assam. Economic hardship contributes to lower enrolment rates and higher dropout risks. While the Fee Waiver Scheme reduces tuition burdens, its localized socio-economic effects have not been

systematically evaluated. An institutional-level study is therefore necessary to assess whether the scheme has meaningfully enhanced access and improved the socio-economic conditions of beneficiary students.

3. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Education and Capability Expansion

Sen (1999) conceptualizes poverty as deprivation of capabilities rather than mere income deficiency. Higher education enhances employability, strengthens agency, and promotes intergenerational mobility. Financial barriers, therefore, restrict substantive freedoms and perpetuate inequality.

3.2 Higher Education Financing and Inequality

Rising private costs in higher education disproportionately affect economically weaker households (Tilak, 2015). Even in public institutions, indirect costs remain substantial. The World Bank (2018) highlights that financial hardship significantly reduces enrolment and completion rates among marginalized populations.

3.3 Social and Cultural Capital

Educational attainment is influenced not only by economic resources but also by social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). While fee waivers reduce economic constraints, structural inequalities may persist due to differential access to supportive social environments.

3.4 Financial Aid and Participation

Evidence suggests that grant-based financial aid increases college attendance and retention among low-income students (Dynarski, 2003). In India, targeted scholarships and fee waivers have strengthened participation among SC, ST, and OBC communities (Tilak, 2015).

4. Policy Context: The Assam Fee Waiver Scheme

The Fee Waiver Scheme introduced by the Government of Assam exempts eligible students from tuition and admission fees based on prescribed income criteria (Government of Assam, 2020). The policy aims to enhance equitable access and improve the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education. At Barkhetri College, the scheme serves as a major financial support mechanism for rural students.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of financial assistance in expanding higher education access.
2. To assess the scheme's impact on enrolment and retention.
3. To analyze the socio-economic profile of beneficiaries.
4. To evaluate the extent of financial relief provided to rural households.

6. Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical design using a mixed-method approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to beneficiary students. Secondary data were obtained from institutional records (2021–2023), government notifications, and scholarly literature.

Purposive sampling was used to select students who availed the scheme. Quantitative data were analyzed using percentages and trend comparisons, while qualitative responses were interpreted thematically.

The study is limited to Barkhetri College; therefore, findings cannot be generalized to all institutions in Assam.

7. Empirical Findings

The empirical results of the study are summarized in *Table 1*, which presents key indicators related to enrolment trends, fee waiver coverage, gender distribution, and selected socio-developmental outcomes for the academic sessions 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 at Barkhetri College.

Table-1 Data Collected for the Study on Fee Waiver Scheme (Barkhetri College)

Indicator	2021–2022	2022–2023	Source of Data	Remarks
Total Enrolment	1827 Students	1869 Students	College Admission Register	Increase in overall enrolment
Fee Waiver Beneficiaries	(77.02%)	(80.61%)	College Accounts Record	Rising beneficiary trend
Male Beneficiaries	51%	49%	College Records	Near gender parity
Female Beneficiaries	49%	51%	College Records	Slight increase in female participation
Students Reporting Delayed Marriage	38% (Surveyed Sample)	44% (Surveyed Sample)	Primary Survey	Increase in educational priority
Students Reporting Improved Political Awareness	62%	68%	Primary Survey	Higher civic engagement
Participation in Cultural/Sports Activities	41%	53%	College Activity Register & Survey	Increased involvement
Students Reporting Improved Social Harmony	72%	78%	Primary Survey	Enhanced campus integration

7.1 Rising Beneficiary Trend

As shown in *Table 1*, total enrolment increased from 1,827 students in 2021–2022 to 1,869 students in 2022–2023, indicating gradual expansion in access to higher education. During the same period, the proportion of students receiving fee waivers rose from 77.02% to 80.61%. This increase reflects improved institutional outreach while simultaneously pointing to continuing economic vulnerability among rural households. From the capability approach perspective, financial assistance enhances individuals’ substantive freedoms by expanding their real opportunities to pursue valued goals such as higher education (Sen, 1999). Thus, the rising beneficiary trend signifies both welfare support and structural economic constraints.\

7.2 Rural Economic Vulnerability

The high proportion of beneficiaries documented in *Table 1* underscores the fragile economic conditions prevailing in the agrarian context of Nalbari district. Rural livelihoods in the region are characterized by small landholdings, seasonal employment patterns, and recurrent flood exposure, all of which contribute to income instability. Such fluctuations directly influence household decisions regarding educational investment. Public financial assistance in higher education therefore performs a stabilizing function, enabling continued participation among economically weaker sections (Tilak, 2015).

7.3 Social Inclusion

Institutional records further indicate that a substantial proportion of beneficiaries belong to OBC/MOBC, SC, and ST communities. This pattern reflects the intersection of economic deprivation and social marginalization in shaping access to higher education. National-level evidence similarly demonstrates that disadvantaged social groups remain disproportionately represented among economically vulnerable populations (Tilak, 2015). The fee waiver initiative thus contributes to inclusive access by mitigating financial barriers faced by historically marginalized communities.

7.4 Gender Dimension

Gender-disaggregated data in *Table 1* indicate near parity among beneficiaries. Male beneficiaries accounted for 51% in 2021–2022 and 49% in 2022–2023, whereas female beneficiaries increased from 49% to 51% during the same period. This shift suggests a modest but meaningful improvement in female participation. Financial constraints often result in discriminatory educational choices within low-income households, where boys may be prioritized over girls (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1997; Kingdon, 2002). By reducing direct educational costs, the fee waiver scheme appears to support gender-equitable access. Such outcomes align with global commitments to inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2022).

7.5 Increases in Age at Marriage

Primary survey findings reported in *Table 1* show that students indicating delayed marriage increased from 38% in 2021–2022 to 44% in 2022–2023. Access to higher education appears to have encouraged families, particularly in rural and char areas, to prioritize degree completion and employment before marriage. This shift reflects expanding aspirations and improved long-term planning among beneficiary households, suggesting broader social transformation linked to educational access.

7.6 Increased Political Awareness

The proportion of students reporting improved political awareness rose from 62% to 68% during the study period (see *Table 1*). Exposure to higher education enhances understanding of electoral processes, governance structures, and civic rights. Education fosters critical reasoning and informed participation in democratic processes, thereby strengthening civic engagement at the grassroots level.

7.7 Participation in Cultural and Sports Activities

Participation in cultural and sports activities increased from 41% in 2021–2022 to 53% in 2022–2023 (*Table 1*). The expansion of enrolment under the fee waiver scheme enabled economically disadvantaged students to engage more actively in extracurricular activities. Such engagement contributes to confidence building, teamwork, leadership skills, and broader social exposure, supporting holistic development beyond academic achievement.

7.8 Increase in Social Harmony

The proportion of students reporting improved social harmony increased from 72% to 78% over the study period (*Table 1*). By lowering financial barriers to admission, the scheme has facilitated interaction among students from diverse caste, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. Classroom collaboration, group discussions, and participation in cultural and sports programmes have promoted mutual understanding and tolerance. Therefore, the fee waiver initiative not only expands access to higher education but also strengthens social cohesion within the institutional environment..

8. Developmental Implications

Higher education promotes employability and income diversification, contributing to human capital formation (Becker, 1993). By expanding access, the Fee Waiver Scheme supports upward mobility and reduces intergenerational poverty (Sen, 1999).

However, financial aid alone cannot resolve systemic challenges such as weak schooling foundations and limited labor market opportunities (Kingdon, 2007). Sustainable development requires complementary reforms in educational quality and employment generation.

9. Limitations of Financial Intervention

Although tuition costs are waived, indirect expenses remain significant (Tilak, 2015). Opportunity costs and part-time employment may affect academic performance (Kingdon, 2007). Administrative constraints and limited institutional resources also influence effectiveness.

Therefore, fee waivers should be integrated with scholarships, skill development initiatives, and employment-linked programmes to ensure long-term impact (UNESCO, 2022).

10. Conclusion

The evidence from Barkhetri College demonstrates that the Assam Fee Waiver Scheme has significantly expanded access to higher education among economically vulnerable students. A large proportion of enrolment depends on state financial support, underscoring the close link between rural poverty and educational participation.

From a capability perspective, the scheme enhances substantive freedoms and promotes equitable inclusion (Sen, 1999). However, sustained reliance on fee waivers reflects persistent structural vulnerability in rural Assam. Long-term equity in higher education requires complementary measures aimed at improving quality, strengthening rural livelihoods, and expanding employment opportunities (Tilak, 2015; UNESCO, 2022).

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