

An Exploratory Study on School Dropout in Byrnihat: Contributing Factors, Systemic Challenges, and Remedial Interventions

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Abstract: Education has been the cornerstone of human development, and its importance resonates strongly across all societies. The Byrnihat area of Meghalaya, home to the Khasi and Garo tribes, has witnessed a unique evolution of education systems, transitioning from traditional, community-based knowledge-sharing to modern formal education. Despite advancements, school dropouts remain a critical challenge in this industrial region. This study examines the factors contributing to school dropouts, including socio-economic, individual, and academic influences. The research juxtaposes the rich indigenous education systems of the Khasi and Garo tribes—rooted in oral traditions, survival skills, and cultural values—with the current education scenario marked by industrialization and socio-economic disparities. Data collected from 150 students across 35 villages and 12 secondary schools reveal significant dropout rates, with individual factors such as lack of interest and teenage pregnancies, socio-economic barriers like poverty and employment needs, and academic challenges, including inadequate infrastructure and curriculum irrelevance. Additionally, the study highlights the minimal involvement of parents, teachers, and school management committees in addressing this issue. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions such as parental awareness programs, improved school infrastructure, and the introduction of culturally relevant curricula. By integrating traditional education principles with modern pedagogical strategies, this research advocates for a holistic approach to curbing dropouts and fostering an inclusive and sustainable education system in Byrnihat, Meghalaya.

Keywords: School Dropouts, Education System, Khasi and Garo Communities in Meghalaya, Socio-Economic Factors, Indigenous Education

1. Introduction

Education is the basic requirement for human development. Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, former President of India, commented that we are a nation of a billion brilliant people and if each person is educated, the power of knowledge can transform India from a developing nation into a strong and economically developed nation. With education, life quality is improved, employment opportunities are broadened and income levels are increased. The development of an individual and the progress of a nation depend on education. In Today's time, access to quality education is the road towards development. Consequently, various nations of the world including India are taking different measures to enhance the quality of education. Multiple programs have been modified from time to time and even new ones have been introduced. As per the United National Development Programmes (UNDP), the Global Human Development Index report 2021 which was cited in the 2022-23 economic surveys, the mean years of schooling in India stands at 6.7 years. As per the Unified Digital Information on School Education (UDISE) plus data 2021-22, there are about 265 million students enrolled in schools across India, but estimates suggest more than 3.5 million students have dropped out after class 10 in the academic year 2021-22. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 looked specifically at a very prominent issue—the high dropout rate of school students, which, despite the government's best efforts, shows a concerning trend. Despite dropout being one of the biggest problems faced by the education sector, addressing it is far more difficult.

Meghalaya is no exception to this. While the Government of Meghalaya has taken various initiatives to tackle dropout in the schools, the State recorded the highest dropout rate in all levels with 9.8% at the Lower Primary level, 9.4% at the upper primary Level, and the secondary level 21.7% way higher than the national average of 1.5%, 3.0% and 12.60% respectively. The serious concern is that the average dropout rate at elementary and secondary levels, year on year, has increased, as seen in Table 1. While the overall dropout picture is grim, the situation is far worse in some districts with alarming rates of dropout. The Secondary school level dropout rate of 27.6% is particularly critical in 6 districts, with the average being more than 30%³. This led the State to rank third among the highest dropout rates at the secondary level.

Table 1: School Dropouts in Meghalaya: State level (India Today. UDISE 2019-2022)

Year	Primary %		Upper Primary %		Secondary %	
	State	National	State	National	State	National
2021-22	9.8	1.5	9.4	3	21.7	12.6
2020-21	7.4	0.8	8.9	1.9	27.9	14.6
2019-20	7	1.5	8	2.6	22.2	16.1

Table 2: Above shows the dropout rate district-wise in Meghalaya:

Dropout District Wise Source: UDISE+ 2021- 22

District	Lower Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary
West Garo Hills	11.05	9.06	25.7
East Garo Hills	12.24	13.32	21.88
South Garo Hills	14.05	13.19	37.14
West Khasi Hills	9.59	14.32	24.34
Ri-Bhoi	8.53	11.64	22.55
East Khasi Hills	6.07	7.57	9.39
West Jaintia Hills	8.9	11.71	16.12
North Garo Hills	13.07	11.29	34.09
East Jaintia Hills	10.66	14.13	27.83
South West Khasi Hills	14.3	12.49	30.86
South West Garo Hills	11.96	9.38	44.86

Source: School Dropouts in Meghalaya: district-wise in Meghalaya: (UDISE 2019-2022)

2. Literature Review

School dropout is a global educational challenge deeply rooted in a web of interrelated socio-economic, institutional, and personal factors. Several scholars have underlined that dropout cannot be viewed merely as an individual issue but must be seen in the broader socio-cultural and systemic context (Porteus et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001). Dropping out of school is often the culmination of prolonged disengagement that begins early in a child's educational journey. Among the dominant causes, poverty remains the most frequently cited and structurally embedded factor, compelling children to abandon school in favor of income-generating activities (Poets et al., 2000; Sharma & Ng, 2000; Kumar et al., 2003). Studies have shown that families struggle with direct and indirect costs of education—such as transportation, uniforms, books, and other fees—which exacerbate dropout rates in resource-constrained households (Garg et al., 2003; Harim, 2003).

Academic and school-related barriers also significantly influence dropout decisions. Government schools, especially in rural and semi-urban areas like Byrnihat, often face acute infrastructural deficits, untrained teachers, and subpar learning outcomes when compared to private institutions (Sharma & Ng, 2000; Garg et al., 2003). Factors like teacher absenteeism, uninspiring pedagogy, lack of libraries or laboratories, and minimal use of digital tools in classrooms contribute to students' disinterest and disengagement from formal schooling (David, 2014; Kapur, 2018; Patidar, 2023). Additionally, qualitative aspects such as the attitudes of teachers toward students, especially those from marginalized communities, and the failure to provide culturally relevant curricula further alienate children from the learning environment.

Moreover, the intersection of household and gender-based responsibilities—particularly for girls—adds another layer of vulnerability. Teenage pregnancies, early marriages, sibling care, and household chores frequently force adolescent girls to leave school prematurely. In rural regions, issues like long distances to school, lack of safe transportation, and the absence of upper primary and secondary schools further hinder continuation (UNICEF, 2018). The lack of co-curricular opportunities, fear of academic failure, and

minimal psychological support also reduce motivation to remain in school.

UNICEF's regional reviews (2018) emphasize systemic gaps in educational governance, teacher vacancies, and ineffective accountability mechanisms. The report recommends shifting ownership and responsibility to district-level education authorities, empowering teachers as agents of change, and encouraging community participation in school management. Decentralized education planning and giving schools autonomy to address localized issues are seen as crucial pathways for reform. Similar models have succeeded in hill nations such as Nepal, which shares socio-geographical similarities with Meghalaya. Tuladhar (2004) documents how Nepal's non-formal education model became an effective strategy to re-engage out-of-school children, offering flexible learning to accommodate economic, social, and cultural constraints.

The literature, therefore, underscores that any effort to reduce dropout must be multidimensional—addressing poverty, academic quality, cultural sensitivity, and systemic reform. Localized, community-driven solutions with a balance between formal and non-formal education strategies can be particularly effective in tribal, industrial, and rural areas like Byrnihat.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design to explore the causes of school dropouts in the Byrnihat region of Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya, with particular focus on the Khasi and Garo communities. Based on UDISE 2021–22 data, purposive sampling was employed to select 32 villages and 12 secondary schools where fieldwork was conducted. The sample comprised 155 students (including dropouts), their parents, 12 head teachers, schoolteachers, out-of-school volunteers, and Block Resource Coordinators. Unstructured interviews were conducted with key informants, including the District and Sub-District School Education Officers, to understand government interventions. Structured interview schedules were administered to the other participants, focusing on three major categories of dropout causes: individual (e.g., lack of interest, early marriage, pregnancy), academic (e.g., poor infrastructure, irrelevant curriculum), and socio-economic (e.g., poverty, need for child labor). Open-ended questions complemented the structured tools to capture deeper insights and cultural dimensions. The area of study covered villages surrounding Byrnihat, an industrial zone with evolving educational challenges. Data were analyzed through thematic and descriptive methods. For the purpose of the study, a dropout was defined as a student who discontinued schooling before completing the required educational level.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1: Sample taken for interviews are 155 students both boys and girls from Class IX and X

SL	Dropout Students	IX	X	Total	155
1	Girls	35	40	75	
2	Boys	40	40	80	

The sample consisted of 155 students who dropped out from Class IX and X—75 girls and 80 boys. Among the girls, 35 were from Class IX and 40 from Class X, while for boys, the number was equal at 40 in each class. This near-equal distribution highlights that dropout is a widespread issue affecting both genders. The slight rise in girl dropouts from Class IX to X may be linked to factors such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, or examination pressure. For boys, economic challenges and the need to support their families could be major contributors. The data indicates that dropout rates peak during the upper secondary stage, suggesting the need for targeted interventions such as counseling, financial support, and gender-sensitive educational policies.

Table 2: School dropout Boys: in the Urban, Rural and community Basis

School dropout Boys: in the Urban, Rural and community Basis					Total
Boys		Urban	Rural		80
	Khasi	13	17	30 (37.5%)	
	Garo	18	32	50 (62.5%)	

Out of 80 boys who dropped out, 37.5% were Khasi and 62.5% were Garo. Among Khasi boys, more were from rural (17) than urban (13) areas, while Garo boys also showed a higher dropout rate in rural areas (32) compared to urban (18). This indicates that rural boys, especially from the Garo community, face greater challenges in continuing education.

Table 3: School dropout Girls: in the Urban, Rural and community Basis

School dropout Girls: in the Urban, Rural and community Basis					Total
Girls		Urban	Rural		75
	Khasi	11	16	27 (36%)	
	Garo	17	31	48 (64%)	

Among the 75 girl dropouts, 36% were Khasi and 64% were Garo. Similar to the boys, rural areas reported a higher number of dropouts for both communities—16 rural Khasi girls vs. 11 urban, and 31 rural Garo girls vs. 17 urban. The data suggests that rural Garo girls are particularly vulnerable to dropping out, possibly due to social and cultural constraints, household responsibilities, or economic hardships.

Table 4: School dropouts on the Basis Khasi and Garo communities

Community Basis: School dropout from Khasi and Garo		
Khasi	60 (38.71%)	Total 155
Garo	95 (61.29%)	

Out of the total 155 students, 60 (38.71%) were Khasi and 95 (61.29%) were Garo. This shows that the Garo community experiences a disproportionately higher rate of school dropouts in the Byrnihat region. The trend calls for community-specific strategies to address socio-cultural and economic factors affecting school retention among Garo youth.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The data collected from 155 students (Table 1) in Class IX and X, including 75 girls and 80 boys, highlights significant disparities in school dropout rates along gender, community, and geographic lines. A closer analysis (Tables 2–4) reveals that dropout rates are notably higher among Garo students (61.29%) than Khasi students (38.71%), and rural areas consistently report more dropouts than urban ones, regardless of gender or community background. This reinforces a trend where Garo students—particularly from rural areas—are more vulnerable to educational discontinuation.

Community and Regional Disparities

Table 2 and Table 3 highlight that both Khasi and Garo students from rural areas drop out more frequently than their urban counterparts. Among boys, 62.5% of dropouts are Garo, while 37.5% are Khasi. Similarly, for girls, 64% are Garo and 36% are Khasi. This pattern mirrors national and regional trends where tribal and rural populations face greater educational disadvantages due to socio-economic and cultural challenges (Shahidul & Karim, 2015).

In the context of Byrnihat, a semi-industrial area on the Assam-Meghalaya border, socio-economic transitions and migration-related issues compound these challenges. Students from low-income and tribal families often face added responsibilities, such as contributing to household income or caring for siblings, thereby reducing their engagement in formal education.

Policy Interventions and Implementation Gaps

Interviews with key stakeholders and education officials in Byrnihat reveal that while the Government of Meghalaya has introduced commendable interventions—such as free entitlements, community awareness campaigns, and enrollment drives—their impact remains limited. The PAB 2024–25 has urged the state to intensify efforts to improve retention rates, indicating the current interventions are insufficient.

Despite 317 Special Training Centres and NIOS special centers, many adolescents are not successfully mainstreamed. These gaps could be attributed to inconsistent implementation, poor follow-up, or a mismatch between program design and community needs. According to Kumar et al. (2003), these systemic failures often coexist with cultural and economic barriers to exacerbate school dropout among rural students.

Individual and Academic Factors

The field study uncovered several critical factors at the individual and school levels. Teen marriages, peer pressure, repeated class failures, and the pressure to earn during adolescence are recurring reasons for school dropout. The transition from vernacular languages (Khasi/Garo) to English at the secondary level also presents an academic barrier, leading to disengagement and failure.

Teacher behavior and infrastructure inadequacies—such as lack of hostels, water facilities, or even basic classroom space—create an environment un conducive to learning, particularly for girls and students from remote villages. These

observations align with national findings, such as those highlighted by then Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, who pointed out issues like teacher absenteeism and untrained teachers as major concerns.

Socio-Economic Challenges

Rural Byrnihat faces significant socio-economic constraints. Many families cannot afford secondary education costs—such as textbooks, transportation, and uniforms—after the upper primary level, especially since the RTE Act (2009) coverage ends there. Large families, single-parent households, and seasonal employment further affect continuity in schooling. Children with disabilities remain particularly at risk due to poor infrastructure and lack of inclusive education interventions.

Such findings echo the observations by Shahidul and Karim (2015), who documented that poverty, peer influence, and lack of motivation contribute strongly to school dropout rates in South Asian contexts. The situation in Byrnihat is no different, where children drop out either to earn for their families or because of repeated academic failure due to poor foundational learning.

Insights and Recommendations

The study underscores that school dropout in Byrnihat is driven by intersecting individual, academic, and socio-economic factors. While government schemes exist, their effectiveness is limited due to implementation barriers and contextual mismatches. Recommendations include:

- 1) Strengthening inclusive education practices, particularly for tribal children and CwDs.
- 2) Enhancing infrastructure in rural schools, including hostels and sanitation facilities.
- 3) Establishing open schooling and bridge courses for overage and working children.
- 4) Hiring trained, community-sensitive teachers and reducing teacher absenteeism.
- 5) Conducting periodic third-party evaluations to assess dropout trends and interventions.

A multi-sectoral approach involving schools, local governance, NGOs, and community members is crucial to reduce dropout rates. Tailoring programs to suit linguistic, cultural, and economic contexts is essential for retention and mainstreaming of vulnerable students in regions like Byrnihat.

6. Conclusion

The issue of school dropouts in Byrnihat, Meghalaya, is complex and multifaceted, deeply rooted in individual, academic, socio-economic, and systemic factors. As observed in the present study, poverty, child labor, adolescent issues such as drug abuse and risky behaviors, and a general lack of awareness about the importance of education continue to contribute significantly to school dropout rates in the area. Despite several ongoing efforts by the Government of Meghalaya, including the provision of free entitlements, special training centers, and collaboration with NGOs, the dropout rate remains high—signaling the need for a more focused and coordinated response.

This field-based study underscores the urgent necessity of addressing the structural barriers to education such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, language barriers in instruction, and limited access to affordable secondary schools. Social and economic pressures on families, especially in industrial and low-income zones like Byrnihat, further push children out of the education system and into labor markets, often facilitated by exploitative practices in local factories and businesses.

The findings point to a pressing need for a holistic and context-specific approach involving government bodies, NGOs, communities, and schools to create a robust support system for at-risk children. Regular monitoring, third-party evaluations, inclusive education models, community engagement, and enforcement against child labor must be strengthened. It is equally important to increase public awareness through campaigns and programs emphasizing the value of education not just for individual empowerment but also for community and national development.

In essence, this study acts as a wake-up call for all stakeholders. It reinforces that combating dropout is not solely about school infrastructure or enrollment drives, but about understanding the lived realities of children and families in marginalized and transitional areas like Byrnihat. Without sustained research, policy reform, and community-centered interventions, the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and social unrest will persist. Therefore, future research must continue to explore this issue deeply and inform practical, long-term strategies to ensure every child not only enters school but stays and thrives in it.

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