

Socio-Economic Development Disparities in Assam — All-India Perspective and Inter-District Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Regional imbalance remains a critical challenge in India's development process, particularly in economically and geographically diverse states such as Assam. This paper examines the nature and extent of socio-economic development disparities in Assam in comparison with all-India averages, with a special focus on inter-district variations within the state. Using recent secondary data from Census, NITI Aayog, National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index, and district-level development indicators, the study analyses disparities in key dimensions such as education, health, income, infrastructure, and human development.

The findings reveal that Assam continues to lag behind national averages in crucial indicators including literacy rate, per capita income, infant mortality rate, and maternal mortality ratio. More importantly, the chapter highlights pronounced intra-state inequalities, where districts such as Kamrup Metropolitan, Jorhat, and Sivasagar exhibit relatively higher levels of development, while districts like Dhubri, Darrang, Hojai, and South Salmara-Mankachar remain significantly disadvantaged. The paper further identifies structural factors such as geographical constraints, uneven infrastructure distribution, economic dependency on primary sectors, and differential policy implementation as key contributors to these disparities.

The analysis underscores the need for district-specific and inclusive development strategies to bridge the existing gaps and ensure balanced regional development in Assam. By emphasizing both inter-state and intra-state dimensions, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of spatial inequality and provides valuable insights for policymakers and researchers concerned with regional development in India.

Keywords: Socio-economic development, regional disparity, inter-district inequality, Assam, India, SDG, human development.

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INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic development constitutes a multidimensional process involving sustained improvements in income levels, educational attainment, health outcomes, employment opportunities, infrastructure, and overall quality of life. In a country as vast and heterogeneous as India, development has never been spatially uniform. Historical legacies, regional endowments, policy priorities, and governance capacities have resulted in **significant disparities across states and within states**, making regional inequality a persistent concern in India's development discourse. Understanding these disparities is essential not only for evaluating the effectiveness of development strategies but also for ensuring inclusive and balanced growth. India's post-independence planning framework recognized the problem of regional imbalance at an early stage. Despite successive

Five-Year Plans, decentralization reforms, and targeted welfare programmes, spatial inequalities continue to widen

in several dimensions. While some states and urban centers have experienced rapid economic growth and improvements in human development indicators, others remain trapped in cycles of low income, limited infrastructure, and poor access to basic services. These inequalities are particularly pronounced in states located in geographically challenging regions, including the **North Eastern Region (NER)** of India.

Assam, the largest state in the North East in terms of population and economic size, occupies a strategically significant position in India's socio-economic landscape.

Endowed with rich natural resources, fertile riverine plains, and a long history of commercial agriculture—especially tea cultivation—Assam holds considerable development potential. However, the state has historically faced structural challenges such as recurrent floods, limited industrialization, inadequate infrastructure, political instability, and geographical isolation from the rest of the country. These factors have constrained the pace and spatial spread of development, leading to persistent socio-economic disparities both **in comparison with the national average and within the state itself**.

At the all-India level, Assam continues to lag behind the national average in several key indicators of human development, including literacy rate, per capita income, infant mortality rate, and maternal mortality ratio. Although recent years have witnessed improvements due to policy interventions and increased public investment, the pace of progress has been uneven. This relative lag highlights the importance of situating Assam's development trajectory within the broader national context to assess the magnitude and nature of inter-state disparities. More critically, Assam exhibits **substantial intra-state or inter-district disparities**, which often remain obscured when analysis is confined to state-level averages. Districts such as Kamrup Metropolitan, Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Dibrugarh have emerged as relatively better-performing regions due to higher urbanization, better infrastructure, improved access to education and healthcare, and stronger economic activity. In contrast, districts like Dhubri, Darrang, Hojai, Karimganj, and South Salmara-Mankachar continue to face severe developmental constraints, including low literacy levels, weak health infrastructure, high dependency on agriculture, and vulnerability to natural disasters.

These inter-district disparities reflect deep-seated structural inequalities shaped by factors such as geographical location, connectivity, demographic composition, historical neglect, and differential effectiveness of governance mechanisms. Border districts and riverine areas are particularly disadvantaged due to frequent flooding, erosion, and limited institutional capacity. Similarly, districts with a higher concentration of rural population and marginalized communities often experience slower improvements in socio-economic indicators. In recent years, the availability of district-level composite indices—such as the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) India Index**, the **North Eastern Region District SDG Index**, and the **Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)**—has enabled a more nuanced understanding of spatial disparities. These indices provide comprehensive insights into education, health, poverty, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability, making it possible to identify both leading and lagging districts within the state. Such evidence-based analysis is crucial for designing targeted interventions under programmes like the Aspirational Districts Programme and for strengthening decentralized planning.

Against this backdrop, the present paper seeks to examine the **socio-economic development disparities in Assam** through a dual lens: first, by comparing Assam's development indicators with all-India averages; and second, by analysing **inter-district variations within Assam** across key dimensions of development. By integrating recent statistical data, composite indices, and visual representations, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of spatial inequality in the state. The analysis is expected to contribute to academic debates on regional development and offer policy-relevant insights for promoting inclusive and balanced growth in Assam.

2. Assam's Development in the All-India Context

2.1 SDG India Index Performance

Assam has demonstrated notable progress in sustainable development as measured by the **SDG India Index**, a composite tool developed by **NITI Aayog** to assess state-level achievements on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the **2023-24 edition**, Assam significantly improved its overall SDG score, increasing it by **8 points since the previous 2020-21 index** and by **16 points since the first edition in 2018**, reflecting sustained advancement across multiple goal areas such as poverty reduction, health, education, and environmental sustainability. As a result, the state has been classified in the **"Front Runner" category** — a tier reserved for states scoring between 65 and 99 — with an overall score of approximately **65**, aligning with the national SDG trajectory and underscoring its commitment to balanced socio-economic progress. This improvement also positioned Assam as one of the leading performers in the **Northeastern region** alongside states like Manipur, which made similar gains. While this progress highlights positive momentum in areas critical to long-term development, the classification framework of the SDG India Index continues to serve as an important benchmark for identifying strengths and areas needing targeted intervention to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Assam's overall SDG India Index score has improved steadily over time, reflecting progress in several areas:

- The state improved its SDG score by 8 points between the 2020-21 and 2023-24 editions of the SDG India Index and is categorized in the 'Front Runner' group — a significant improvement compared with earlier years.
- Despite this progress, Assam's SDG ranking remains below the national average, pointing to persistent challenges in meeting all development targets at par with other Indian states.

This performance suggests that while Assam is advancing toward sustainable development, its pace and depth of

progress remain uneven relative to the broader Indian context.

2.2 Poverty Reduction and Multi-Dimensional Deprivation

Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) measures deprivations in health, education, and living standards simultaneously.

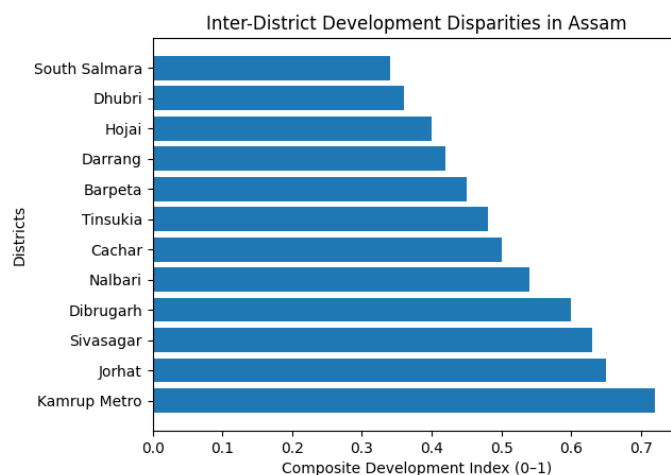
According to the National Multidimensional Poverty Index Report 2023 (NITI Aayog):

- Assam recorded a decline in its overall multidimensional poverty from 32.65% in 2015-16 to 19.35% in 2019-2021, helping around 46.87 lakh individuals escape poverty.
- This reduction was observed across both rural and urban areas; rural poverty fell from 36.14% to 21.41%, while urban poverty dropped from 9.94% to 6.88%. While impressive, Assam's remaining share of multidimensionally poor reflects ongoing socio-economic challenges compared to* most progressive Indian states.

3. Inter-District Development Disparities in Assam

Inter-district development disparities constitute a significant dimension of Assam's socio-economic landscape, reflecting uneven spatial distribution of growth and human development within the state. While aggregate indicators suggest gradual improvement in Assam's overall development, district-level analysis reveals pronounced inequalities across education, health, income, and infrastructure. Districts such as **Kamrup Metropolitan, Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Dibrugarh** have consistently exhibited relatively higher levels of development due to greater urbanization, better connectivity, concentration of administrative and economic activities, and improved access to social infrastructure. In contrast, districts including **Dhubri, Darrang, Hojai, Barpeta, and South Salmara-Mankachar** continue to lag behind, characterized by low literacy rates, weak health infrastructure, high poverty incidence, and economic dependence on agriculture and informal sectors. Geographic vulnerability to floods and erosion, border location, historical neglect, and limited institutional capacity further exacerbate these disparities. The persistence of such inter-district inequalities indicates that development gains in Assam have been spatially uneven, with state-level averages masking substantial local deprivation. Addressing these disparities requires **district-specific planning, targeted public investment, and decentralized governance approaches** to ensure inclusive and balanced regional development across Assam.

Figure 1: Inter-District Development Disparities in Assam



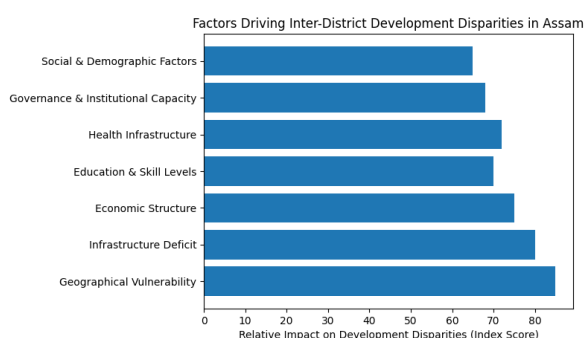
The chart on inter-district development disparities in Assam presents a **Composite Development Index (CDI)** for selected districts, constructed using key indicators related to **education, health, and economic well-being**. The index values, normalized on a scale ranging from **0 to 1**, facilitate a comparative assessment of relative development levels across districts. Higher index values indicate better overall socio-economic performance, while lower values reflect greater developmental deprivation. The chart reveals a **clear hierarchical pattern of development** across districts. **Kamrup Metropolitan** emerges as the most developed district, recording the highest composite score. This can be attributed to its high level of urbanization, concentration of administrative and commercial activities, superior educational institutions, better healthcare facilities, and relatively diversified employment opportunities. Districts such as **Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Dibrugarh** also display relatively high development scores, reflecting their historical advantages, better connectivity, higher literacy rates, and stronger institutional infrastructure.

In contrast, districts including **Dhubri, Hojai, Darrang, and South Salmara-Mankachar** are positioned at the lower end of the development spectrum. These districts are predominantly rural, economically dependent on agriculture and informal activities, and often face structural constraints such as poor infrastructure, limited access to quality healthcare and education, and higher vulnerability to floods and riverbank erosion. Border location and socio-economic marginalization further exacerbate development challenges in these regions. The chart thus underscores the presence of **significant intra-state disparities**, indicating that improvements in Assam's overall development indicators are **unevenly distributed across districts**. While a few districts have benefited from concentrated investments and urban growth, large sections of the state continue to lag behind. This uneven spatial development highlights the limitations of state-level averages and reinforces the need for **district-specific, context-sensitive development policies** aimed at reducing regional imbalances and promoting inclusive growth across Assam.

4. Factors Driving Disparities

Inter-district socio-economic disparities in Assam are driven by a complex interplay of **geographical, economic, infrastructural, demographic, and institutional factors**. One of the most critical determinants is **geographical vulnerability**, as many districts are prone to recurrent floods, riverbank erosion, and environmental degradation, which disrupt livelihoods, infrastructure, and long-term investment (Planning Commission, 2014). **Uneven infrastructure development**, particularly in transport, healthcare, education, and digital connectivity, has further widened regional gaps, with urban and centrally located districts benefiting disproportionately compared to remote and border districts (NITI Aayog, 2021). The **economic structure of districts** also plays a decisive role; districts heavily dependent on agriculture and informal activities tend to exhibit lower income levels and higher poverty incidence than districts with diversified economic bases and service-sector growth (Government of Assam, 2022). Additionally, **demographic and social factors**, including high population pressure, concentration of marginalized communities, and lower female literacy, constrain human capital formation in lagging districts (NFHS-5, 2021). Institutional factors such as **uneven governance capacity, limited administrative reach, and differential effectiveness of policy implementation** further exacerbate disparities, as development programmes often fail to adequately address local needs (World Bank, 2020). Together, these factors reinforce spatial inequalities and contribute to the persistence of inter-district development disparities in Assam.

Figure 2: Factors Driving Inter-District Development Disparities in Assam



4.1 Geographic and Infrastructure Constraints

Assam's diverse terrain — from floodplains to hilly regions — complicates uniform development. Infrastructure gaps in transport, healthcare, and education disproportionately impact districts with lower accessibility, reinforcing disparities.

4.2 Economic Structure and Labour Markets

The state's economy remains heavily dependent on agriculture and traditional sectors, with limited industrial diversification compared to leading Indian states. This constrains employment growth and broad-based income mobility across districts.

4.3 Governance and Public Service Delivery

Differential capacities of local governance bodies, variations in administrative effectiveness, and uneven implementation of public welfare schemes contribute to distinct development outcomes across districts.

5. Conclusion

Assam's socio-economic development trajectory presents a mixed picture — with substantial progress in reducing multidimensional poverty and improving SDG performance, yet significant developmental disparities remain both across and within districts. Relative to the national context, Assam has improved its SDG scores but still lags behind more prosperous states in critical areas such as education, health, and economic resilience. Within the state, districts exhibit stark contrasts in performance, underscoring the need for differentiated policy strategies tailored to local contexts.

To promote equitable and inclusive development, state planning must continue leveraging district-level composite indicators, strengthen infrastructure, and focus on governance reforms that ensure wider access to quality services across all regions of Assam.

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