




All Roads Lead to SCHOOL

Towards universalisation of elementary education in
Assam through initiation of short-term bridge course



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Axom Sarba Siksha Abhijan Mission
Education Department
Government of Assam





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Tarun Gogoi
Chief Minister
Assam



Message

The challenge of universalizing elementary education is daunting. Results of house-to-house surveys have shown that in Assam there are almost fourteen lakh children in the 6-14 years age group who are not going to school.

A concerted campaign has been launched under the Axom Sarba Siksha Abhijan Mission to ensure that a large number of 'out of school' children in the age group 6-9 years are brought into regular schools. The success of the short term bridge course strategy implemented in 9 DPEP districts during June-August 2002 has paved the way for the launch of a much bigger "back to school" programme in all districts of the state.

Let us all join hands to make the dream of "Every child in school, Every child learning" come true in the near future.

Dispur,
Dated the 23rd October 2002

(Tarun Gogoi)



Pankaj Bora
Education Minister
Assam



Foreword

The short term bridge course programme in the 9 DPEP districts has been hugely successful. This was implemented with full involvement of parents, VEC members and Gaon Panchayat representatives. Most of the areas where bridge course were organized were disadvantaged and difficult areas like *char* and other minority community dominated areas, tea garden and remote forest areas.

About thirty one thousand children in the age group 5-7 years who are not going to school were admitted through a short term bridge course into regular schools. Now their attendance and academic progress is being monitored regularly to ensure that they continue in school and get promoted to the next higher grade.

Now, that elementary education for 6-14 years old children is set to become a Fundamental Right, such programmes will have to be taken to scale and implemented throughout the state by the education department.

Dispur,
Dated the 23rd October 2002

(Pankaj Bora)

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Turning the dream of education into a reality for all...

Mohammed Hafiz Rehman*, a daily wage-earner in Mayang district of Assam, always dreamt that one of his five children would become a physician. However, poverty prevented him from sending any of them into school. "We cannot afford proper clothes, nor books", the middle-aged Rehman confessed. One day, however, things changed, when people from the ongoing Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) came to him and told him about the special initiative called bridge course.

They told him that through bridge courses, children between five and eight years of age who had never been to school were identified and put through a 45-day programme full of fun, games and studies. Through this educational package, these children would be able to catch up with all that they had missed by not going to school.

Rehman was excited to learn that after completing the bridge course, more than 45,000 children—never exposed to education earlier—would join school on August 16 all over Assam. These children would be put in the first or second standard in the school nearest to them, and his daughter would be one of them!

"I recently put my youngest daughter Eliza into the bridge course. When the SSA people came to my house and convinced me that I would not have to pay for the books, I grabbed the opportunity. Perhaps, who knows, my daughter can now finally become a doctor!"

A little distance away, Eliza laughs loudly at a story recounted to her and her course-mates by the teacher. "Please narrate one more story", she pleads with her teacher.

Like Eliza, there are more than five lakh children in the age group 5-8 years in Assam, who have never been to school. They urgently need this kind of intervention in order to bring them into the fold of education.

Interestingly, this innovative programme goes about the task of getting the children into its fold by motivating both the parents and their children through several contact programmes in the villages.

Introduction



Assam is making energetic efforts to achieve the challenging goal of Universal Elementary Education (UEE). The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) are two major initiatives in this direction. While the DPEP is being implemented in nine districts, the SSA is operational in the remaining 14 districts of the state.

Though considerable progress has been made in the area of elementary education in the state, the goal of UEE is yet distant. A large number of children are still not enrolled in schools. A house-to-house survey, which was carried out in 2001 in nine DPEP districts of Assam, revealed that a considerable number of children in the age group of 5–14 years were out of school. They had either dropped out or had never been enrolled.

The task of achieving universal elementary education in Assam is especially challenging, given the state's difficult terrain, inaccessible areas, floods, remote tribal pockets and cultural diversity.

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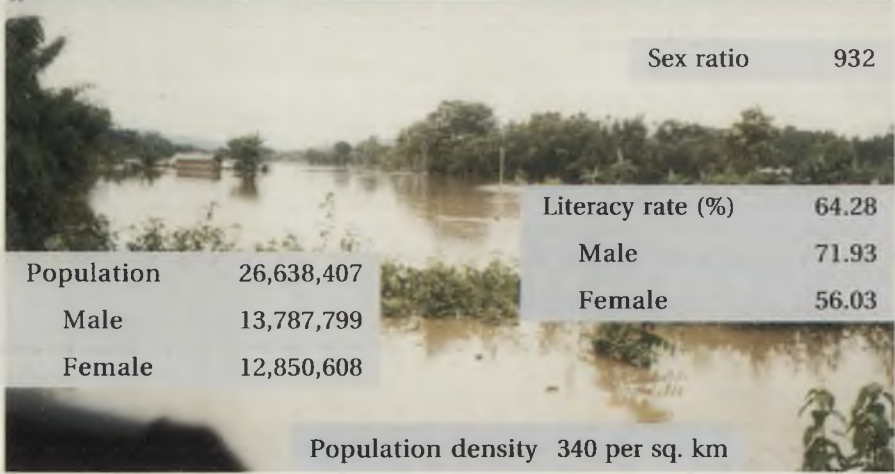


In order to give an impetus to the ongoing efforts towards UEE, and overcome the multiple challenges posed by the conditions in the state, both short-term and long-term strategies are required to bring the large number of out-of-school children into the educational mainstream.

To reach out to the thousands of never-enrolled children in the age group of 5-7 years and mainstream them into regular schools, the idea of setting up bridge course

centres in the most needy areas in the nine DPEP districts, as an immediate measure, emerged through discussion and consultation among programme implementers. The bridge course planned to reach the most needy areas, such as *char* areas, tea gardens and those habitations that did not have schools nearby. Villages with at least 20 out-of-school children in the 5-7 years age group were selected to set up bridge course centres.

Assam: A Statistical Profile



	Sex ratio	932
	Literacy rate (%)	64.28
	Male	71.93
	Female	56.03
Population	26,638,407	
Male	13,787,799	
Female	12,850,608	
Population density		340 per sq. km



Bridge course: Extending a helping hand



A bridge course is a brief course of study imparted to out-of-school children within a short span of time, so that they are brought at par with their peers undergoing formal education. In Assam, a 45-day package was developed, in which the teaching was done through various activities and games. The idea was to prepare the children for the formal classes in which they aspired to join.

Bridge course centres were opened in the nine DPEP districts, and aimed to mainstream 30,000 children into formal schools by 16 August 2002. The choice of villages or habitations to open the bridge course centres was based on the state-level database on habitations with high non-enrolled students.

The ceremonial opening of bridge course centres took place on 27 June 2002. The following day, bridge course centres started in various places such as meeting halls, NGO clubs and people's homes. Once the schools closed for the summer vacation from 1st July, the venue of the bridge course was shifted to the schools.



Districts covered under the bridge course programme



Guidelines for bridge course implementation

For systematic implementation of the bridge course programme and its integration with government/provincialised schools, guidelines were issued by the government:

- The bridge course programme and its follow-up have to be entirely community-based and community-managed.
- Village Education Committees (VECs) would be responsible for their functioning, while head teachers would be responsible for overall supervision.
- The head teacher would evaluate the bridge course students at the time of entry into the formal schools (by testing on major competencies), and the children would be allowed to be admitted into the formal school at any point during the year based on their competencies.
- In certain cases, VECs would be required to continue support to the bridge course children recently enrolled in school.
- The financial requirement for conduct of bridge courses and follow-up actions would be met through DPEP & SSA funds.





MLA, Sarabhog LAC on the way to inaugurate Bridge Course Centre on 27th June, 2002

Planning and implementation

The initiative for the short duration bridge course started on 28 May 2002 with a one-day state level orientation of state and district level personnel. The agenda for the meeting was the introduction of bridge course, contact programme, three-day motivational camp, roles and responsibilities of the head teacher and Academic Coordinator (AC), as well as supervision and monitoring plan.

The entire exercise of operationalisation of the bridge course involved a multi-pronged process. The input package was developed in a workshop conducted in a participatory manner involving educational functionaries, programme functionaries,

and resource persons (both external and local). Simultaneously, communities were briefed about the initiative through village-level contact programmes. In addition to sharing of data and thus justifying the need for the initiative, the communities were also involved in updating the status of out-of-school children in their respective villages through identification of such children. A readiness package was also developed.

In order to streamline the activities, an activity schedule for the entire duration of the bridge course was chalked out and the programme functionaries were asked to strictly follow the same. The activities involved contact programmes, training and motivation camp.

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Contact programmes

Contact programmes at the village level informed the community about the programme. The VECs took the lead role in organising these programmes. The first contact programme discussed the aims of UEE, educational status of the village, roles and responsibilities of the VECs, panchayat members, parents, etc. The second contact programme discussed the three-day motivational camp, planning for support to the motivational camp and identification of Academic Coordinators.

Participants of the contact programmes at village level included VEC/panchayat members, parents/guardians of out-of-school children, local youth clubs/NGO members, mothers' groups, head teachers and other teachers of the village. At least two Resource Persons from district and block level task forces had to attend the contact programme

Selection of Academic Coordinators

Academic Coordinators (ACs) were selected for imparting the packages, both in readiness camps as well as in bridge course centres. Each AC was responsible for 20-30 children. The AC handled the teaching part of the course, while the head teacher provided continuous support throughout the course.

The qualifications for selecting an AC were:

- High school or equivalent from a recognised board/organisation.
- Pre-service teacher training and social work background were given preference.

Apart from these, the AC was required to be from the concerned Gaon Panchayat, preferably from the same village, and having adequate knowledge of local language and community. The selection was done by the VEC, which checked, scrutinised and short-listed the candidates based on merit. The ACs were imparted a seven-day training in two phases in order to prepare them for conducting the bridge courses

The AC was appointed on a contract basis for a period of 85 days from the date of opening of the bridge course centre. He/she received Rs 1000/- after completion of 45 days of the course as the first instalment of honorarium. The second instalment was to be paid after 15 days at the rate of Rs 25/- for every child who was mainstreamed from the bridge course and who regularly attended school. The third and last instalment was to be paid at the rate of Rs. 25/- per child who is still continuing and regularly attending the schools a month and a half after mainstreaming.



The AC was involved in visiting the houses of children identified for the bridge course and requesting the parents to attend the motivation camp and send their children to the three-day motivation camp in their village. During the bridge course, he/she provided overall academic support to the learners and took necessary remedial measures in consultation with the head teacher. The AC's involvement does not end even after mainstreaming the children into the formal school. The AC has to ensure regular attendance of the children.

Training

Before the three-day motivational camp for children, a three-day state-level training was organised. The agenda included a training module for Cluster/District Resource Persons, a seven-day module for ACs and head teachers, discussion on

academic package, evaluation of learners and mainstreaming.

Further, ACs, VEC members, head teachers, Mothers' Groups, local NGOs, youth, etc., were imparted training, which covered the arrangements for the motivational camp, activity schedule for the camp and documents, regular support and monitoring, discussion with parents/ VECs and signing of agreement paper by parents and evaluation of the camp. The ACs were also given academic training in two rounds.

Motivational camp

A three-day motivational camp for children was organised from 18-20 June, in which various games for learning numbers, alphabets, action songs and paper games were taught. On the last day of the motivation camp, the VECs took the signatures of all parents symbolically in a consent form in the presence of the community, whereby they promised to send their children regularly to the bridge courses, and later, to the school.

Role of head teacher

The head teacher of the formal school had a crucial role to play in the running of the bridge course. Since government and provincialised schools were major components of the bridge course programme, the responsibility of



A view of 3-day motivation camp for bridge course children



supervision and monitoring was vested with the head teacher. Along with the ACs, the head teachers also underwent a seven-day training to prepare them for their role.

Assessment of students

Children admitted to the bridge course were evaluated weekly (each Saturday) on their competencies in language and mathematics. An individual progress card was developed for both class I and II. In each evaluation, the child was given grades (A, B or C) for the week and the remedial measures to be undertaken. The evaluation period lasted till 14 August 2002, after which a certificate was issued by the head teacher for the child to be mainstreamed into a class, based on the child's level of competency. The individual progress card was countersigned by the CRCC, AC and the head teacher of the school. One core group member (CRCC) had to be present during every evaluation. The certificate to be issued at the end of the bridge course included the grade and level of competency achieved by the child and whether the child needed any additional support.

Community participation

In most of the districts, there was an overwhelming response from the community towards the initiative of bridge course. Starting from identification of the never-enrolled and dropout students in the village to organising the contact programme in the village, the VECs carried out their responsibility well. There was an excellent response from the Gaon Panchayat presidents, as well as members.

There were instances of pressure from the community to open the bridge course centres in their village/habitation. These pressures were difficult to resist. However, the centres were opened in villages/habitations which had a high number of non-enrolled children, identified on the basis of data available to the state government. The existence of a VEC, along with community participation, was also an important determinant, as the centres were to be monitored by the VEC.

Study materials, including textbooks, pencils and teaching-learning materials for the children were provided by the government. There was also a provision of midday meal for the children at the centres.



Bridge course programme: Milestones

- 30-31 May 2002: Two-day district level training for district, block and cluster level educational functionaries.
- 4-7 June 2002: First contact programme at village level.
- 7-8 June 2002: Second contact programme.
- 11-13 June 2002: Three-day state-level training on the three-day motivational camp for children.
- 15-16 June 2002: Training of ACs, VECs, head teachers, Mothers' Groups, local NGOs, youth, etc., on the three-day motivational camp for children
- 17 June 2002: Visit by AC and VEC to ensure the participation of children and cooperation of parents, NGOs, panchayat, etc.
- 18-20 June 2002: Three-day motivational camp for children at the village level.
- 22-25 June 2002: Four-day (first phase) block-level training for the ACs and head teachers.
- 27 June 2002: Ceremonial opening of bridge course centres at village/habitation level.
- 7-9 July 2002: Three-day (second phase) block-level training for ACs and head teachers.
- 16 August 2002: Ceremonial mainstreaming of bridge course learners.



A successful completion... but the effort continues



The bridge course was a 45-day package, in which children were categorised according to their competency level based on a test. The test evaluated the children's ability to identify vowels and consonants, reading, writing, counting and simple mathematical skills.

Altogether 31,604 children were enrolled in 935 bridge course centres. On 16 August 2002, as targeted, 30,158 children were mainstreamed. The mainstreaming was marked by a ceremony in each of the villages having a centre. These ceremonies were attended by dignitaries like ministers, MPs, MLAs, Deputy Commissioners, Zilla Parishad members, Gaon Panchayat members, educational functionaries, as well as parents, guardians, and community members.

Reaching the unreached

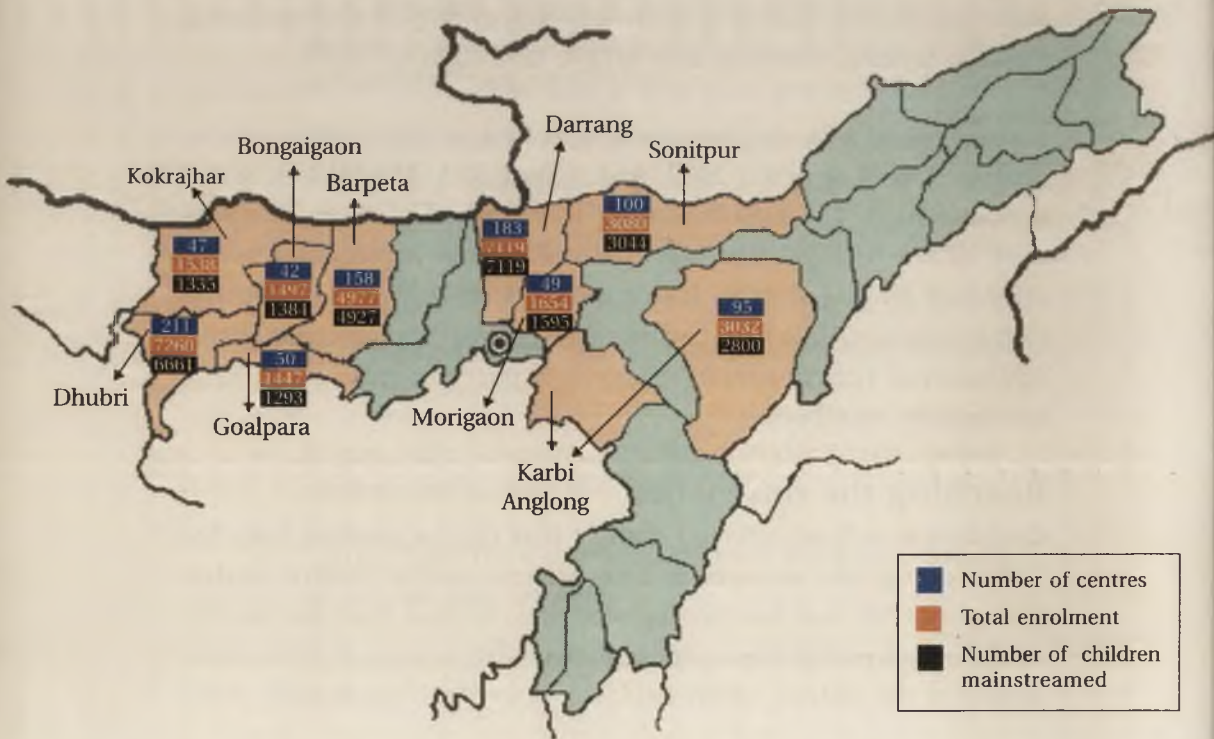
Goalpara is a flood-affected district that can be reached only by boat during the monsoon. The bridge course centre under Sutarpara CRC was functioning well and children from the nearby habitation attended the centre regularly. There were several other centres in the district, where bridge courses were functioning well.



The underlying fact here is that given the physical difficulties, as well as the geographical and socio-cultural diversity of Assam, starting of the short-term bridge course as a special intervention for UEE was a tremendous task. The initiative has been able to mobilise and sensitise the community towards achieving the goal of UEE within a short span of time.

The special intervention for UEE, that is, the short-term bridge course ended with the mainstreaming of children on 16 August 2002. As a follow-up measure, the state government has already planned to continue its efforts towards UEE, ensuring that every child in the age-group 6-14 years in selected blocks of the nine districts is enrolled in school or completes primary

District-wise number of Bridge Course Centres, enrolment & children mainstreamed



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education through an alternative learning system in the next one year.

Longer-duration bridge courses for children in the age group 7-14 years will be undertaken to cover the children who are still left out. It is planned not only to cover the nine DPEP districts, but also the remaining 14 SSA districts of the state. Thus efforts to achieve the challenging goal of UEE in Assam will continue vigorously.



Final evaluation of learners at a bridge course centre

Learning is fun

Bishnurabha Smriti Prathmik Vidyalaya, Morigaon district, was a bridge course centre located close to a paper mill. Most of the students were children of workers employed in the mill. A total of 32 children were enrolled in the centre- 15 girls and 17 boys. There were two classes –I & II.

The Academic Coordinator, Ms. Ruby Dey, a matriculate, described the positive response to the centre, "It is heartening to see the response of the people whose children are studying. They bring tiffins for their children and others give them money to buy sweets. They bring the children to school even when it is pouring heavily and take them back after the classes end at 2 p.m. Sometimes the timings stretch till 3 p.m., as the children are keen to study more. Most of them can spell out their names and recite the lessons and poems they have learnt. They are taught through games, songs and dance, group games and picture cards."

The centre was neatly decorated with teaching materials and aids prepared by the AC. It was under regular supervision of the head teacher, CRCC, VEC President, Block Resource Person (BRP) and others, who visited the centre and put their signature along with comments on the individual progress card of the children.



Enthusiastic learners

Ronua village, in Goalpara district, has a population of 5000. The bridge course centre at Ronuapara Lower Primary School had 30 students in the age group of 5-7 years, out of whom two were dropouts. Of the 28 regular children enrolled for the course, 19 were female while 9 were male. The centre had only one section in class I and no class II. All the students were from the Muslim community and had a poor socio-economic background. Most of the children's parents worked as agricultural labourers or as rickshaw-pullers. There was high incidence of migration in search of work.

The Academic Coordinator, Mr Abu Baker Siddiqui, was a local villager who was highly respected in the village and also a former SMC president. The AC was a matriculate but had keen interest in teaching. The village had a literacy rate of 15-20% and the community was very enthusiastic about the whole initiative.

According to Mujahid Hossain, an agricultural labourer whose two children were enrolled in the BC centre, " We conducted house-to-house survey for non-enrolled children. The process of VEC formation was very smooth in our village. The VEC members are keen that children should attend schools and there is pressure to start another bridge course centre in the village. The nearest school is 3 km away. The VEC members have collected money from the community to purchase benches and repair the school building. They also intend to take up plantation drive in the school premises. The VEC members have requested the authorities to ensure regular supply of midday meal to the children."

According to the AC, the children were so keen to study that there was always full attendance in the class. Some slow learners were being taught through play way-method, using pictures, pebbles for counting, etc."



Challenges ahead



The success of the bridge course programme was mainly due to the concerted efforts and commitment of the functionaries, as well as the participation and motivation of the community. However, there are still serious problems that need to be attended to.

The major challenge is to ensure regular attendance of children after mainstreaming in formal schools. This would require community support in order to ensure the regular attendance of children.

Other challenges are:

- Creating a supportive school environment for the bridge course learners.
- Providing support under government schemes in those areas where there are no government schools, but “venture” schools or tea garden management schools.
- Creating extra space in overcrowded schools for the bridge course learners.
- Equipping the teachers, especially in multi-grade situations, to handle large number of children, especially additional children from bridge courses.





Ceremonial mainstreaming in the presence of Shri Pankaj Bora, Hon'ble Minister of Education, Assam, 16 August 2002

- Providing additional support to weaker children for a month or two after mainstreaming.
- Motivation of head teachers, to retain their enthusiasm.

To overcome these challenges, the following steps are planned:

- Organise meetings of the head teachers, ACs and community members, to finalise decentralised action plans to retain all children in schools after mainstreaming.
- Monitor the attendance of the bridge course learners in schools on a monthly basis.

- Provide extra academic support to the weaker group of children at least for two hours as part of remedial teaching either in the beginning or at the end of school hours till the end of September 2002.
- Preparation of weekly academic plans for the weak children by AC, head teachers, and providing additional support.
- Take the help of good head teachers to motivate the community as well as other teachers, and to use them as resource teachers as and when necessary.

The commitment of the state government, Education Department functionaries at all levels, panchayat and community representatives augurs well for a concerted effort to achieve the goal of UEE in Assam. In the long term, the issue of equity, that is, special focus, attention and allocation of additional resources for disadvantaged, out-of-school children, has to be enshrined as a government policy. A much larger programme of bridge courses will be necessary for children in the age group 9-14 years, so that no child remains out of school in the state.



A model bridge course centre

The Tezalpur Bridge Course Centre in Nadura block was an example of a well functioning centre. The ACs, Jasmine Charu and Basudev Hajung, had full knowledge of the package. All the children attended the classes regularly. They stayed at the centre for more than the stipulated two hours, as they enjoyed learning. In fact, six of the learners had completed their learning package within 30 days only! Group learning was being practised, and weaker children were being given special attention. The centre was not only about studies--the children were being taught exercise, meditation and prayers.

The ACs had done a good job of motivating the parents and community, who had helped in clearing the wild bushes around the centre. Tree plantation was being done in the place and a playground was also being prepared for the children.

This boy is special...

The bridge course centre under Haldhiati cluster, Howraghat block of Karbi-Anglong district had a special student—Bijayshree Paul. This nine-year-old suffered from a number of disabilities. Polio in both his legs had made it difficult for him to walk; his eyesight was very poor, and he also suffered from a speech impediment. However, all this had not deterred this brave young boy from coming to the bridge course centre every day, and studying with all his heart. He was doing especially well in mathematics and language. In all this, credit must also go to AC Baburam, who had been giving special attention and care to the boy.



Abbreviations

AC	Academic Coordinator
BRP	Block Resource Person
CRC	Cluster Resource Centre
CRCC	Cluster Resource Centre Coordinator
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
UEE	Universal Elementary Education
VEC	Village Education Committee

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**District-wise number of Bridge Course Centres,
enrolment & children mainstreamed**

Sl. No.	District	Number of centres	Total enrolment	Number of children mainstreamed
1	Darrang	183	7119	7119
2	Dhubri	211	7260	6661
3.	Morigaon	49	1654	1595
4.	Karbi Anglong	95	3032	2800
5.	Barpeta	158	4977	4927
6.	Bongaigaon	42	1497	1384
7.	Goalpara	50	1447	1293
8	Kokrajhar	47	1538	1335
9	Sonitpur	100	3080	3044
	Total	935	31604	30158