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Education Status of Mousuni Island in the Present Context

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Abstract:

Mousuni Island, a geographically isolated and environmentally vulnerable region in West Bengal, presents a unique context for examining the current status of education. This study explores the educational conditions of the island in the present scenario, with particular focus on access, infrastructure, quality of learning, and socio-economic influences. Due to its remote location, frequent natural disasters, and limited connectivity, the island faces significant challenges in ensuring consistent educational opportunities for its residents.

The research highlights that although primary education facilities are available, issues such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, and irregular attendance continue to affect the quality of education. Socio-economic factors, including poverty, livelihood insecurity, and lack of awareness, further restrict students' participation, especially among marginalized communities and girls. The digital divide has also become more evident in the post-pandemic period, as limited access to devices and internet connectivity has hindered the adoption of online learning.

At the same time, the study identifies certain positive developments, such as increasing awareness about the importance of education and government initiatives aimed at improving school enrollment and retention. However, these efforts are often constrained by structural and environmental limitations.

The study concludes that improving the educational status of Mousuni Island requires a multi-dimensional approach, including better infrastructure, teacher support, digital inclusion, and community engagement. Addressing these challenges is essential for promoting equitable and sustainable educational development in the region.

Keywords: *Cyclone Impact, Sea-Level Rise, Embankments, Sustainability, Capacity Building.*

Introduction:

West Bengal is a constituent state of India. Mousuni is a highly vulnerable island situated within the Namkhana Block of the Sundarbans region, located in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. Its geographical coordinates are 21.66 degrees North latitude and 88.30 degrees East longitude. The island is positioned at the southwestern extremity of the Sundarbans—the world's largest mangrove forest—and lies along the shores of the Bay of Bengal. To the north, east, and west, Mousuni is separated from the mainland

by two distributaries of the Ganges: the Chenai and the Muriganga; to the south lies the open sea. Notable attractions on the island include Baghdanga, Poilagheri (Kakramari), Paschim Saikat (West Beach), Baliara, Salt, and Kusumtala. The majority of the residents inhabit kaccha (temporary) houses, featuring roofs constructed from thatch, tiles, corrugated iron sheets, or asbestos. Traditionally, they engage in the cultivation of paddy and vegetables within this region—one of the most fertile river deltas in the world. They also earn a substantial income through the cultivation of betel leaves. Additionally, they practice freshwater fish farming in local ponds. Those who do not own land work as agricultural laborers. Women collect shrimp fry from the saline waters, selling them to earn their livelihood.

Currently, the island stands as a significant geopolitical focal point regarding climate change. Due to geographical factors and incessant natural disasters, the island's socio-economic infrastructure has been devastated, and its educational system has likewise suffered adverse effects. According to data from the 2011 Census, 3,578 people reside on Mousuni Island. Between 1979 and 2011, coastal erosion resulted in the disappearance of approximately 3.82 square kilometers of Mousuni Island's landmass.

Review of Related Literature:

The educational status of geographically isolated and socio-economically vulnerable regions has been widely discussed in sociological and educational research. Mousuni Island, being a remote coastal area of West Bengal, shares many characteristics with such marginalized regions, including limited infrastructure, environmental vulnerability, and restricted access to quality education.

Banerjee and Duflo (2011), in their book ***"Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty"***, argue that poverty significantly affects educational participation and learning outcomes. Their work highlights that in economically disadvantaged areas, families often prioritize immediate livelihood needs over long-term educational goals, which directly impacts school attendance and retention.

PROBE Team (1999), in ***"Public Report on Basic Education in India"***, provides a comprehensive analysis of rural education and identifies issues such as poor school infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, and lack of accountability as major barriers to effective education in remote areas. These findings are relevant to regions like Mousuni Island.

Little (2008), in ***"Access to Basic Education in Rural Areas"***, emphasizes that geographical isolation and lack of transportation facilities often hinder children's access to schools. The study suggests that physical distance and environmental challenges play a critical role in shaping educational opportunities in coastal and island regions.

The impact of natural disasters on education has been examined by Shaw et al. (2011) in *"Disaster Education and Management"*, where the authors highlight that disaster-prone areas frequently experience disruptions in schooling. Coastal regions like Mousuni Island, which are vulnerable to cyclones and flooding, face similar interruptions that affect continuity in education.

Warschauer (2004) in ***"Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide".*** The study argues that unequal access to digital resources and internet connectivity creates new forms of educational inequality, especially evident in the post-pandemic shift toward online learning.

Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010), in ***"Access to Elementary Education in India: Country Analytical Review",*** highlight that while enrollment rates have improved, disparities in quality and access persist, particularly among marginalized communities in rural areas. Their findings underline the importance of inclusive policies and targeted interventions.

Dreze and Sen (2013), in ***"An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions"*,** discuss how structural inequalities, including poverty and regional disparities, continue to influence educational outcomes in India. They stress the need for strengthening public education systems in underserved areas.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that educational challenges in regions like Mousuni Island are shaped by a combination of economic hardship, geographical isolation, environmental risks, and limited access to digital and institutional resources. While policy efforts have improved enrollment, significant gaps remain in ensuring quality, continuity, and inclusiveness in education. Addressing these issues requires context-specific strategies that consider both social and environmental realities.

Objectives of the Study:

The present study aims to examine the educational status of Mousuni Island in the current context. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. **To assess the overall Educational status of Mousuni Island**
2. **To analyze the accessibility of Education**
3. **To evaluate the quality of Educational infrastructure**
4. **To explore the impact of natural disasters on Education**

Research Questions:

1. What is the current level of access to primary and secondary education for children on Mousuni Island, and how does it vary by gender?
2. How do environmental factors, such as cyclones, floods, and land erosion, impact school attendance and continuity of education on the island?
3. What are the key socioeconomic challenges faced by families that affect students' enrollment, retention, and academic performance?
4. How effective are government programs, scholarships, and local initiatives in improving educational outcomes and reducing dropout rates on Mousuni Island?

Methodology:

To analyze the overall landscape of the current education system on Mousuni Island, this study employs both qualitative and descriptive methodologies. Given the limitations regarding island-specific census data, this survey relies primarily on primary field surveys and secondary data.

- **Primary Data Collection:** The ground reality has been captured through direct and informal discussions with working teachers on the island, local social workers, and representatives of the 'Rupantaran Foundation.' Particular emphasis was placed on drawing upon local experiences to understand the extent of infrastructural damage to schools and the prevailing trends of school dropouts.
- **Secondary Data Collection:** Necessary information was collected and analyzed from various NGO reports concerning the environmental impact on the Sundarbans, academic journals, and records maintained by the District Disaster Management Department (2020–2024).

- **Comparative Analysis:** The depth of the current crisis has been assessed through a comparative review of student attendance rates and school dropout trends—comparing the periods both preceding and following Cyclones Amphan and Yaas.

Discussion:

1. "What is the current level of access to primary and secondary education for children on Mousuni Island, and how does it vary by gender?"

On Mousuni Island, basic access to schooling exists through a network of primary and secondary institutions that serve local children from early grades up to Class 12. Many children are enrolled in government schools, and programs like Kanyashree Prakalpa (scholarship for unmarried girls aged 13–18) have been introduced by the West Bengal government to support female education and encourage girls to stay in school longer. Such measures initially helped boost girls' participation by offering financial incentives tied to continued enrollment.

However, despite the presence of schools, actual access and continuity vary markedly by gender, especially at higher grade levels. Data from local reports show that while primary enrollment may be relatively high, dropout rates increase sharply after the ninth grade, with girls being disproportionately affected. At Mousuni Cooperative School, for example, about 60 % of students who leave school are girls, often due to pressure to undertake household responsibilities, early marriage, or economic constraints that make continued education difficult.

For boys, attendance also declines with age, but for different reasons, such as migration for work to other Indian states, reflecting a gendered variation in educational access and retention. By the age of 15–17, both boys and girls face reduced school participation, but the underlying causes differ: economic needs drive boys toward labor, while sociocultural norms and safety concerns affect girls' educational continuation.

In summary, basic access to schooling exists for both genders on Mousuni Island, but sustained attendance and progression to higher grades are more limited, especially for girls, due to a combination of socioeconomic and cultural factors that differ by gender.

2. How do environmental factors, such as cyclones, floods, and land erosion, impact school attendance and continuity of education on Mousuni Island?

Environmental factors play a **major role in disrupting education** on **Mousuni Island**. The island's **geographical vulnerability**—being only about three metres above high-tide level—makes it especially prone to the effects of cyclones, tidal flooding, and land erosion. Frequent severe storms like *Bulbul*, *Amphan*, and *Yaas* have caused repeated infrastructural damage, flooding school buildings, and displacing families, which significantly hampers the regular attendance of students. Schools often serve as emergency shelters during such events, forcing prolonged closure and breaking learning continuity for months at a time. Victims have reported that textbooks and school supplies are washed away or rendered unusable by floods, further complicating educational access.

The consequences of this environmental stress extend beyond physical damage. The loss of homes and farmland due to **saltwater intrusion and land erosion** intensifies economic insecurity, compelling families to prioritize survival over schooling. Many children are withdrawn from education to assist in family income generation or domestic responsibilities after natural disasters. For instance, school dropout rates at local secondary institutions have climbed following consecutive cyclones, with nearly 15–20 % of students aged 14–18 leaving school in a single academic year. Girls are especially affected, with nearly 60 % of those

dropping out being female, partly due to increased economic pressure and early marriage following livelihood loss.

Additionally, ongoing **land loss and soil salinity** reduce agricultural productivity, eroding household stability and making schooling continuity less of a priority for struggling families. These environmental stressors thus contribute not just to episodic disruptions but to deeper, **systemic setbacks in education attendance and retention** on the island.

3. What are the key socioeconomic challenges faced by families that affect students**'** enrollment, retention, and academic performance on Mousuni Island?

Socioeconomic challenges are among the most significant barriers affecting **students**' **enrollment, retention, and academic performance**on **Mousuni Island.** The island's economy is heavily dependent on **agriculture, fishing, and daily wage labor,** yet recurrent natural disasters such as cyclones and saltwater intrusion have repeatedly damaged farmland and livelihoods, pushing many families into poverty and economic instability. When crops fail or farmlands become unusable, parents prioritize basic survival needs over education, often withdrawing children from school to contribute to household income or even marrying off daughters to reduce financial strain.

Poverty on the island is pervasive. Approximately a significant proportion of residents live with low per-capita incomes well below state and national averages, and many families struggle to afford even basic educational expenses such as uniforms and books, despite free government schooling. This economic pressure contributes directly to **school dropouts after primary grades,** with families viewing continued education as unaffordable or irrelevant to future livelihood needs. A lack of economic diversification beyond subsistence livelihoods also means limited opportunities for youth, reducing motivation for academic achievement when employment prospects remain scarce.

Moreover, migration for work is common among adult family members, especially men, leaving children with fewer caregivers and resources at home. Parental absence due to migration and unstable incomes can negatively impact children's attendance and study environments, further hindering academic performance. Combined with entrenched gender norms that sometimes undervalue girls' education, these socioeconomic challenges create deep and multifaceted obstacles to sustained educational participation on the island.

4. How effective are government programs, scholarships, and local initiatives in improving educational outcomes and reducing dropout rates on Mousuni Island?

Government interventions and local initiatives have played a **significant though mixed role** in addressing educational challenges on **Mousuni Island**. Among the most prominent state-level programs is the **Kanyashree Prakalpa,** a conditional scholarship scheme aimed primarily at keeping girls in school and discouraging early marriage. This initiative offers annual financial support to unmarried girls aged 13–18 and a larger one-time grant when they turn 18, conditional on continuing their education. Across **West Bengal**, Kanyashree has been widely credited with reducing dropout rates, with state data showing that primary dropout among girls has reached zero and secondary and higher secondary rates have substantially declined.

In the specific context of coastal areas like Mousuni, the scheme initially helped encourage girls to remain in school longer, as noted by school administrators. However, its impact has been **challenged by recurring disasters**—after cyclones like Amphan and Yaas, the number of girls staying in school under the program has declined, indicating that financial incentives alone are not enough in the face of severe environmental stress and poverty.

Beyond Kanyashree, local NGOs such as the **Rupantaran Foundation** have initiated coaching support and parental engagement programs, which temporarily boosted class attendance up to 95 % for some grades. While these grassroots efforts show promise in improving attendance and motivation, many are limited in scale, funding, and long-term sustainability.

Overall, **government scholarship schemes and local initiatives have contributed to improved educational access and reduced dropout pressures,** especially for girls. Yet,**systemic issues like disaster vulnerability, economic hardship, and school quality continue to weaken their effectiveness**, underscoring the need for more integrated and context-specific strategies.

Impact of Cyclones on the Education System:

In recent years, a succession of powerful cyclones originating in the Bay of Bengal—such as Aila (2009), Amphan (2020), Yaas (2021), and Remal (2024)—has devastated the educational infrastructure of Mousuni Island. Research indicates that following any major disaster, the school dropout rate on the island rises significantly. Notably, in the aftermath of Cyclone Amphan, this rate surged to approximately 20–25 percent (Saha, 2020).

The intrusion of saline water into agricultural lands shatters the economic backbone of families, the repercussions of which directly impact the students. With textbooks and notebooks ruined by saltwater and access routes severed, many students are compelled to abandon their studies midway and migrate to other states to work as laborers. Furthermore, as school buildings are frequently utilized as relief camps during disasters, regular academic instruction remains suspended for extended periods, thereby disrupting the continuity of the students' education.

First-Generation Learners And Institutional Constraints:

The majority of children on Mousuni Island are the first in their families to pursue formal education. Consequently, they lack any prior family experience or infrastructure to support their studies. In government schools, the teacher-to-student ratio is extremely unfavorable, with a single teacher often required to instruct a class of 80 to 100 students. As a result, opportunities for individualized attention diminish, and the overall quality of education is compromised.

Students on Mousuni Island have access to a limited number of schools—institutions that serve as the sole educational lifeline for thousands of students.

- **Baghdanga Chakratna High School:**This is one of the island's principal and oldest educational institutions.
- **Mousuni Cooperative High School:**This school also plays a pivotal role in expanding educational opportunities on the island.
- **Primary Schools:**There are approximately 11 to 12 primary schools scattered across the island.

The Trend of School Dropouts:

Currently, due to the absence of a 'pass-fail' system or mandatory examinations up to the eighth grade, students' interest in learning and their intrinsic motivation are failing to develop effectively. After progressing through the grades up to the eighth without facing any academic hurdles, many students struggle to cope when they finally encounter rigorous examinations upon entering the ninth grade. Consequently, nearly half of the students drop out of school before completing the twelfth grade.

According to recent statistics:

- **Drop-out Rate:** It has been observed that in the islands of the Sundarbans region, approximately 25–30% of students are unable to continue their studies after the secondary level. The primary reasons for this are poverty and the compulsion to migrate to other states in search of livelihood.

- **Gender Disparity:** In the realm of higher education, the enrollment rate for girls is even lower than that of boys, as commuting to distant colleges—which often involves crossing rivers—frequently poses a security risk for young women.

- **Geographical Distance:** The distance from the southern extremities of the islands (such as Baliara) to colleges located on the mainland is approximately 15–20 kilometers; this commute consumes 2–3 hours of time daily.

Structural Crisis and Technological Disparity:

The geographical isolation of the island poses a major obstacle to higher education. Commuting daily from remote areas—such as Baliara or Kusumtala—to colleges on the mainland consumes approximately 2–3 hours; this situation, in particular, becomes a source of insecurity for female students. Furthermore, the benefits of modern educational tools—such as the internet or smart classrooms—have yet to reach the majority of schools in Mousuni. While students on the mainland are embracing digital education, only 15–20% of the students on this island have access to smartphones or internet facilities. This technological divide is causing the island's students to fall behind in the competitive race.

Socio-Economic Impact:

The quality of school education is heavily contingent upon the economic status of the students' families.

- **Migration and School Dropouts:** Driven by economic hardship within their families, many students on the island abandon their studies to migrate to other states in search of manual labor to earn a livelihood. The trend of dropping out of school—particularly after completing secondary education—is on the rise.

- **Commuting Challenges:**As Mousuni is an isolated island, there are no colleges located on the island itself to facilitate higher education. Students are compelled to cross the river by boat to reach Namkhana or Kakdwip; a journey that becomes extremely hazardous, time-consuming, and expensive during the monsoon season.

Positive Aspects:

Despite the numerous challenges facing this island, there are several positive aspects:

- **Efforts by Teachers and Locals:** Many teachers and local clubs on the island have established voluntary coaching centers or libraries; these initiatives play a crucial role in retaining students and ensuring their continued education, even amidst an adverse environment.

- **Government and Private Initiatives:** The government has undertaken various projects—such as the provision of bicycles (under the 'Sabuj Sathi' scheme)—while various NGOs are formulating plans to construct eco-friendly schools.

The Role of 'Rupantaran Foundation' As A Successful Model:

To address the profound educational crisis plaguing this island, the 'Rupantaran Foundation' has taken an exemplary initiative. They have organized coaching support for students in grades 6 through 8. The results of this endeavor have been highly encouraging:

- **Increased Attendance:** Regular student attendance has risen to an impressive 95%.
- **Community Participation:** Local residents have actively joined this noble cause by generously providing space for the activities free of cost.
- **Heightened Awareness:** Alongside academic instruction, regular discussion sessions are conducted to raise awareness regarding child rights, the detrimental effects of child marriage and child labor, and the importance of eliminating gender inequality.
- **Engagement with Parents:** Through regular home visits aimed at sensitizing parents, a mindset is being fostered that encourages students to pursue their education up to the Higher Secondary level.

Educational Statistics of Mousuni Island:

Based on specific statistical data regarding Mousuni Island (under the Namkhana Block) as cited in the South 24 Parganas District Handbook, and further corroborated by local surveys and NGO reports, the educational statistics are as follows:

Damage to School Infrastructure (2019–2024):

- Due to the impact of Cyclones Amphan (2020) and Yaas (2021), approximately 80% to 90% of the primary and secondary schools on Mousuni Island sustained partial or complete damage.
- Records indicate that floodwaters inundated nearly 70% of the schools, resulting in the destruction of textbooks, furniture used for the Mid-Day Meal program, and administrative documents.

School Dropout Rate:

- Typically, a dropout rate of 5% to 10% is observed on this island; however, in the aftermath of natural disasters (such as following Cyclone Amphan), the dropout rate has surged to between 20% and 25%.

Impact of Salinity Due to Rising Sea Levels:

- As a result of seawater intrusion caused by rising sea levels, approximately 60% of the educational institutions—which lack any permanent source of potable water—have seen their tube wells rendered unusable due to salinity.

Online Access:

- Among the students on the island, only 15% to 20% possess access to a smartphone or an internet connection required for attending online classes.

The Future of Education And the Path Forward for Mousuni Island:

The education system on Mousuni Island—situated along the Bay of Bengal coast within the Sundarbans region of West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district—currently stands in a critical state of crisis. Due to the island's geographical isolation, devastating natural disasters such as Aila, Amphan, Bulbul, and Yaas, as well as constantly rising sea levels, educational infrastructure has been repeatedly damaged. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for learning demonstrated by the students here—despite their constant struggle against various adversities—is truly commendable in this day and age. However, individual efforts alone are insufficient to bring about a fundamental transformation in the island's education system. The following measures are indispensable for achieving such change:

- **Disaster-Resilient Infrastructure:** The educational institutions on this island must be reconstructed in a manner that enables them to withstand and mitigate the impacts of devastating natural disasters and the intrusion of saline water caused by rising sea levels.
- **Integration of Technology:**To bridge the disparity between the island and the mainland, it is imperative to introduce high-speed internet, utilize advanced technology, and expand the reach of "smart classrooms," thereby ensuring that students have access to online resources, technological tools, and internet connectivity.
- **Vocational Education:**The island's economy relies primarily on agriculture and fisheries. If vocational education or skills-based training can be integrated into the curriculum, it will open up new horizons for employment opportunities.

In the current context of Mousuni Island, the critical state of education is not merely a localized issue; rather, it is a broader social challenge stemming from environmental and geographical changes. Through a harmonious synergy of government grants, the active engagement of voluntary organizations, social initiatives aimed at improving educational standards (such as the *Rupantaran Foundation*), and heightened local public awareness, the students of this island can truly be enlightened by the radiance of a modern, science-oriented education.

The advancement of education on this island is not confined solely to academic instruction; it is inextricably linked to environmental sustainability. If island inhabitants are to survive while contending with geographical shifts, rising sea levels, and climate change, it is imperative to establish a cohesive and disaster-resilient education system. The advancement of educational technology and the expansion of technical education can open up new horizons in this regard.

Conclusion:

In the present context, the education system on **Mousuni Island** reflects a mix of progress and persistent challenges. Several government primary and secondary schools exist on the island, providing basic schooling opportunities from early grades up to higher secondary level. These institutions serve a significant number of students, including girls, and are essential for local literacy and foundational learning.

However, the island's unique geographical and socioeconomic conditions have adversely affected educational outcomes. Frequent natural disasters such as cyclones and land erosion disrupt normal schooling and contribute to high dropout rates, especially after middle school. Many adolescents leave education early to seek employment or are married off, with girls particularly vulnerable to these pressures. Government initiatives like scholarship programs have offered some support, but limitations in infrastructure, motivation, and meaningful learning opportunities persist. Overall, while access to schooling exists, sustaining continuous and quality education remains a challenge for the youth of Mousuni Island in the current era.

Recommendations:

To safeguard the education system on Mousuni Island and secure the future of its students, it is imperative to adopt the following measures:

1. **Disaster-Resilient School Buildings:** The Department of Education should allocate special funds specifically for this island. Schools must be constructed in a manner that ensures they are elevated and cyclone-resistant. Furthermore, it is essential to equip schools with solar panels and rainwater harvesting systems to ensure that access to drinking water and electricity remains uninterrupted even during times of disaster.

2. **Establishment of Digital Learning Hubs:**To bridge the educational gap between the island and the mainland, 'Digital Learning Hubs' equipped with satellite internet connectivity must be established. It is necessary to provide special subsidies or tablet devices to students in grades 9 through 12, thereby ensuring that their studies remain uninterrupted even when schools are forced to close due to flooding.

3. **Expansion of Vocational Education:** Keeping the island's economy in mind, vocational courses focused on coastal livelihoods—such as brackish-water aquaculture or mangrove nursery management—should be introduced through the West Bengal Skill Development Society (PBSSD). This initiative will empower students to become self-reliant and help reduce the need for them to migrate to other states in search of employment.

4. **Climate-Impacted Student Allowance:** Special financial assistance should be provided to families that have fallen victim to the impacts of climate change. This measure will help prevent children from being forced into child labor or subjected to early marriage as a consequence of extreme poverty.

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