



# Inclusive Education in North-East India: Cultural Contexts, Indigenous Knowledge, and Schooling

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## Abstract

Inclusive education in North-East India must be understood within its distinctive cultural, linguistic, and socio-political contexts. The region is characterized by rich indigenous knowledge systems, ethnic diversity, community-based social structures, and geographically challenging terrains, all of which significantly influence schooling practices. This paper presents a thematic and analytical review of the status of inclusive education in the North-Eastern states of India, with particular emphasis on the intersection of cultural contexts, indigenous knowledge traditions, and formal schooling systems. Drawing upon policy documents, secondary data, and selected empirical studies, the paper examines how national and international frameworks—such as the Right to Education Act (2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and the National Education Policy (2020) are interpreted and implemented in the region. The analysis highlights key challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited teacher preparedness for inclusive pedagogy, language barriers, and the marginalization of indigenous perspectives within mainstream curricula. At the same time, the paper foregrounds community practices, traditional support systems, and indigenous pedagogies that offer valuable pathways for culturally responsive and context-sensitive inclusion. The study argues that inclusive education in North-East India cannot rely solely on uniform policy prescriptions but must integrate indigenous knowledge, local participation, and culturally sustaining practices. The paper concludes by proposing policy and practice-oriented recommendations for strengthening inclusive education through localized, culturally grounded, and equity-driven approaches.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; North-East India; indigenous knowledge systems; cultural diversity; disability and schooling; educational policy

## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a global priority grounded in the principles of equity, social justice, and human rights. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) emphasize the right of all learners, particularly those with disabilities and marginalised identities, to access quality education within regular

schooling systems. In India, inclusive education has gained constitutional and legislative backing through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD), 2016, and the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, which collectively mandate the creation of equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Despite these progressive policy frameworks, the implementation of inclusive education remains uneven across regions. North-East India, comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—presents a unique socio-cultural and educational landscape. The region is marked by ethnic plurality, linguistic diversity, strong indigenous knowledge systems, community-centric social organisation, and challenging geographical conditions (Baruah, 2020). These contextual factors significantly shape schooling experiences and the interpretation of inclusive education policies.

Conventional models of inclusive education in India have largely been informed by urban-centric, standardised, and deficit-oriented approaches, often overlooking indigenous pedagogies and local realities (Singal, 2019). In North-East India, schooling has historically evolved alongside community traditions, customary institutions, and informal systems of knowledge transmission. However, mainstream education policies tend to marginalise these indigenous epistemologies, resulting in cultural dissonance and limited participation of local communities in inclusive schooling processes.

This paper argues that inclusive education in North-East India must be re-conceptualised through a culturally responsive and indigenous knowledge-informed lens. Rather than treating diversity as a challenge to be managed, inclusion should recognise cultural plurality as a pedagogical resource. The present study undertakes a thematic and analytical examination of the status of inclusive education in North-East India by exploring the intersections of culture, indigenous knowledge, disability, and formal schooling.

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the conceptual and policy foundations of inclusive education in the Indian context.
2. Analyse the status and challenges of inclusive education in North-East India.
3. Explore the role of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural contexts in shaping inclusive schooling.
4. Propose context-sensitive strategies for strengthening inclusive education in the region.

## **2.Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1. Conceptual Foundations of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that all learners, irrespective of disability, gender, ethnicity, language, or socio-economic background, should learn together in mainstream educational settings (Ainscow, 2015). Unlike integration, which requires learners to adapt to existing systems, inclusion demands systemic transformation to accommodate diversity (Florian, 2014).

In the Indian context, inclusive education has evolved from earlier models of special education and integrated education, particularly through initiatives such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) and later the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Scholars argue that while policy discourse increasingly embraces inclusion, classroom practices often remain exclusionary due to structural and attitudinal barriers (Singal & Jeffery, 2011).

## 2.2. Inclusive Education in North-East India

Research on inclusive education in North-East India highlights persistent challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, limited access to assistive technologies, and geographical isolation (Devi & Devi, 2018). Studies conducted in Manipur and Assam indicate that children with disabilities face compounded exclusion due to poverty, conflict-affected settings, and lack of specialised support services (Das, 2021).

Furthermore, linguistic diversity poses significant challenges. Many children enter school with mother tongues that differ from the medium of instruction, leading to early learning difficulties and misidentification of disabilities (Mohanty, 2019). These issues are often exacerbated by culturally inappropriate assessment tools and standardised curricula.

## 2.3. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Education

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) refer to community-based, experiential, and culturally embedded forms of knowledge transmitted across generations (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). In North-East India, indigenous education has traditionally emphasised collective responsibility, experiential learning, environmental harmony, and social inclusion.

Scholars argue that integrating indigenous knowledge into formal schooling can enhance relevance, learner engagement, and cultural identity (Battiste, 2013). However, formal education systems often privilege Western epistemologies, marginalising indigenous ways of knowing and reinforcing educational exclusion (Dei, 2018).

## 2.4. Cultural Responsiveness and Inclusive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy recognises learners' cultural backgrounds as assets rather than deficits (Gay, 2018). In inclusive classrooms, such pedagogies promote participation, respect diversity, and foster a sense of belonging. Research suggests that culturally grounded inclusive practices are particularly effective in multicultural and indigenous contexts (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Despite growing recognition, empirical studies focusing on culturally responsive inclusive education in North-East India remain limited, underscoring the need for region-specific analyses.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a **qualitative thematic review design**, drawing upon secondary sources to analyse inclusive education in North-East India. This approach is suitable for synthesising policy documents, research studies, and contextual narratives to generate interpretative insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

#### 3.2. Data Sources

Data were collected from:

National policy documents (RTE Act, RPwD Act, NEP 2020)

Reports by UNESCO, ICSSR, and the Ministry of Education

Peer-reviewed journal articles (2005–2025)

Government and NGO reports focusing on North-East India

#### 3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to:

1. Policy implementation
2. Cultural contexts
3. Indigenous knowledge systems
4. Barriers and facilitators of inclusion
5. Themes were interpreted through a critical and contextual lens, ensuring alignment with inclusive education frameworks.

#### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

As the study is based on secondary data, ethical concerns related to human participants were minimal. Academic integrity and proper citation practices were strictly followed.

### 4. Discussion

#### 4.1. Status of Inclusive Education in North-East India

The analysis reveals that while inclusive education policies are formally adopted across North-Eastern states, implementation remains fragmented. Infrastructure gaps, lack of trained special educators, and insufficient funding continue to impede effective inclusion. Rural and remote areas are particularly disadvantaged, reinforcing regional inequities.

## 4.2. Cultural Contexts and Schooling

Cultural practices in North-East India often emphasise collectivism, mutual care, and community responsibility, which align closely with inclusive education principles. However, formal schooling frequently operates in isolation from these cultural norms, resulting in reduced parental engagement and learner alienation.

## 4.3. Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Inclusion

Indigenous knowledge systems offer alternative pedagogical approaches that are inherently inclusive. Storytelling, apprenticeship-based learning, and community mentoring can support diverse learners, including children with disabilities. Yet, these practices remain largely excluded from mainstream curricula.

## 4.4. Teacher Preparedness and Attitudes

Teacher attitudes significantly influence inclusive practices. Studies indicate that many teachers in the region lack adequate training in inclusive pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching (Singal, 2019). Continuous professional development rooted in local contexts is essential.

## 4.5. Towards Context-Sensitive Inclusion

The findings suggest that inclusive education in North-East India requires a paradigm shift from uniform policy implementation to context-sensitive adaptation. Integrating indigenous knowledge, local languages, and community participation can strengthen inclusive schooling outcomes.

## 4.6. Implementation Gaps between Policy and Practice

Despite strong legislative backing through the RTE Act (2009), RPwD Act (2016), and NEP (2020), inclusive education in North-East India continues to suffer from a policy–practice divide. While policy documents emphasize equity, access, and participation, ground-level implementation remains inconsistent across states and districts. This gap is particularly evident in remote and border areas, where schools lack basic infrastructure, trained personnel, and assistive resources.

The findings suggest that inclusive education policies are often implemented through uniform administrative templates, which fail to accommodate the region's geographical isolation, linguistic plurality, and socio-political sensitivities. As a result, inclusion is frequently reduced to enrolment-based compliance, rather than meaningful participation and learning outcomes for children with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

## 4.7. Cultural Contexts and Learner Experiences

One of the central insights of this study is that cultural contexts significantly influence how inclusion is understood and practiced. North-East Indian societies are traditionally community-oriented, with strong kinship

networks and shared responsibilities for child-rearing. These values resonate closely with the philosophical foundations of inclusive education, which emphasize belonging, cooperation, and mutual support.

However, formal schooling systems often operate in cultural isolation from these community practices. The dominance of standardised curricula, external assessment mechanisms, and non-local languages of instruction creates a **cultural disconnect** for many learners. This disconnect disproportionately affects children with disabilities, first-generation learners, and indigenous students, who may be wrongly perceived as academically deficient rather than culturally disadvantaged.

#### 4.8. Marginalisation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The study highlights the continued marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems within formal education. Indigenous pedagogies in North-East India—such as oral traditions, experiential learning, environmental stewardship, and apprenticeship-based skill transmission—are inherently inclusive and adaptive. These practices accommodate diverse learning styles and emphasize collective success over individual competition.

Yet, mainstream schooling rarely recognises these systems as legitimate sources of knowledge. This epistemic exclusion not only undermines cultural identity but also weakens inclusive education efforts by ignoring locally grounded strategies of support and participation. The findings support the argument that inclusive education cannot be culturally neutral and must actively engage with indigenous epistemologies to be effective.

#### 4.9. Reconceptualising Inclusion through a Contextual Lens

Overall, the discussion points to the necessity of reconceptualising inclusive education in North-East India beyond a technical or administrative framework. Inclusion must be understood as a context-sensitive, culturally embedded, and socially negotiated process. Such a reconceptualisation aligns with global calls for inclusive education that respect diversity while addressing structural inequalities.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the status of inclusive education in North-East India through the lenses of cultural contexts, indigenous knowledge systems, and schooling practices. The analysis reveals that while India's inclusive education policies are progressive and rights-based, their effectiveness in the North-Eastern region is constrained by contextual mismatches, institutional limitations, and epistemic exclusions.

Inclusive education in North-East India cannot be meaningfully advanced through uniform policy prescriptions alone. The region's distinctive cultural landscapes, indigenous traditions, linguistic diversity, and community-based social structures require an approach to inclusion that is flexible, locally grounded, and culturally sustaining. The findings demonstrate that indigenous knowledge systems are not obstacles to inclusion but rather valuable pedagogical resources that can enhance participation, belonging, and learning for diverse learners.

The study also underscores that inclusion is not merely about accommodating children with disabilities within existing systems but about transforming educational structures to reflect social realities and cultural plurality. Teachers, institutions, and policymakers must move beyond deficit-oriented models and embrace inclusive education as a process of systemic change.

In essence, inclusive education in North-East India holds transformative potential if it is reimagined as a dialogue between policy and culture, between formal schooling and indigenous wisdom. Such an approach not only strengthens educational equity but also contributes to cultural preservation, social cohesion, and democratic participation.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen inclusive education in North-East India:

### 6.1. Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms

- Integrate indigenous knowledge systems, local histories, and cultural practices into school curricula.
- Promote multilingual education that recognises mother tongues as foundational to learning, particularly in early grades.
- Encourage experiential and community-based learning approaches that support diverse learners.

### 6.2. Teacher Education and Professional Development

- Revise teacher education curricula to include inclusive education, disability studies, and culturally responsive pedagogy as core components.
- Establish region-specific in-service training programmes that address local challenges and resources.
- Encourage reflective teaching practices that challenge deficit-based assumptions about learners.

### 6.3. Community and Indigenous Institution Engagement

- Actively involve traditional institutions, community elders, and local organisations in inclusive education planning and implementation.
- Recognise community-based support systems as partners in inclusion rather than informal substitutes.
- Promote school–community partnerships to strengthen trust and participation.

### 6.4. Flexible Policy Implementation

- Allow state- and district-level adaptations of national inclusive education policies.
- Develop contextual indicators of inclusion that go beyond enrolment statistics.
- Ensure adequate funding for inclusive education initiatives in remote and underserved areas.

## 6.5. Research, Documentation, and Monitoring

- Encourage ICSSR- and UGC-supported research focusing on region-specific inclusive practices in North-East India.
- Document successful indigenous and community-based inclusive models for policy dissemination.
- Establish participatory monitoring mechanisms involving educators, parents, and learners.

## 6.6. Key Recommendations

1. Curriculum Integration: Incorporate indigenous knowledge and local cultural practices into school curricula.
2. Teacher Education: Strengthen pre-service and in-service teacher training on inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy.
3. Community Participation: Engage traditional institutions and community leaders in inclusive education planning.
4. Policy Flexibility: Allow regional adaptations of national inclusive education policies.
5. Research and Documentation: Promote region-specific research on inclusive education practices in North-East India.

In conclusion, inclusive education in North-East India can be transformative if it moves beyond deficit-based models and embraces cultural plurality as a pedagogical strength. Such an approach aligns with both global inclusive education goals and India's constitutional commitment to equity and social justice.

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