



CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA TRANSITIONING TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted challenges faced by students from North-East India as they transition from secondary education to higher education institutions. Drawing on qualitative data and regional case studies, the paper analyzes how the stringent State Board assessment systems in the North-East create competitive disadvantages for students applying to universities outside their region, despite their often more advanced English language proficiency compared to their counterparts in India. We further investigate how systemic administrative issues, including lack of transparency in educational governance, backdoor appointments, and political interference in recruitment processes, compound these transitional difficulties. The research highlights significant disparities between rural and urban students, gender-specific obstacles faced by female students from the region, and persistent socio-emotional challenges, including racial discrimination and cultural isolation. The findings underscore the need for collaborative interventions between central and state governments to implement comprehensive cultural orientation programs, strengthen educational governance frameworks, and develop tailored support systems for North-Eastern students. This study contributes to addressing the critical gap in scholarly literature concerning education in the North-East region of India.

Keywords

North-East India, Education, Administration, Cultural Adaptation, Educational Inequality, Higher Education Access, Educational Reform, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Transitioning from high school to college is generally challenging for students, and this paper will focus on students from the regions of North-East India. Education in India is primarily administered by state-run public education system that falls under *central*, *state*, and *local*. The level of education consists of early childhood education, primary education, secondary education, higher education, and vocational education. Over the years, data shows that there has been significant growth in private schooling and shrinkage in the size of government schools. However, unlike other countries, where private schools are more expensive, private schools in India usually have a low-fee tuition rate when compared with per-pupil expenditure in government schools, state per capita income, and rural minimum wage income for daily wage labor, etc. (Kingdon, 2020). Both government schools (public) and private schools play a significant role in nurturing and molding a child till their higher secondary education. Once they complete and pass their 12th grade examination (Higher Secondary Examination), the student goes on to pursue higher education in colleges and universities. It is equivalent to an Alevel in the United Kingdom and the final year of high school in the United States of America. There is also an underlying difference in gender literacy rates and gaps in education when compared to North-East and other states, which needs to be studied more.



The North-East region consists of eight states: *Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura*. The region is comprised of small towns, districts, and rural villages. Each state is ethnically, linguistically, socio-culturally, and religiously diverse but shares many common attributes. The total population as per the 2011 census in the North-East region is 45,772,188, which is only 3.78% of the rest of India (*Ministry of Home Affairs*, 2011). Among the states, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya are predominantly Christian. According to the Pew Research Center, “Christians are a majority in Nagaland (total population 2 million, or 20 lakhs), Mizoram (1 million, or 10 lakhs) and Meghalaya (3 million, or 30 lakhs) – three small states in a sparsely populated, fertile mountain range in India's Northeast” (Kramer, 2021, para. 5). Over the years, the people of the region have suffered through internal and external conflicts, militancy, and political turmoil both from over ground and underground. Despite its persistent looming crisis over the years, the region has seen an upward trend in the level of literacy, but there is more room for improvement. In the census literacy rate in North-East India from 1951 to 2011, the data points out that pre-independence time, the literacy rate in the North-East states of India has seen a major development in all eight states. For example, in 1951, Mizoram had the highest literacy rate among the eight states, at 31.14%, but by 2011, it had spiked to 91.33%. Whereas, when we compare with the rest of India, in 1951, it was 18.33%, and in 2011 it was 72.99% (*Ministry of Home Affairs: Government of India*, 2011). However, these numbers seem outdated and do not account fully for the fact that there have been enormous changes in Indian education. It is also important to note that the literacy rate and the challenges faced by students during their transition from school to college do not paint a clear picture; rather, they show only numbers without a background story. Therefore, this paper will attempt to analyze the given data and explore the challenges and gaps in the field of education in North-East India.

This region is often overlooked, and there is insufficient literature and research pertaining to the challenges faced by students transitioning to colleges. Lyngdoh Nonglailait & Myrthong, (2021) argued that “little literature exists in our state [Meghalaya] and the country on the transition of rural students into higher education, especially on the challenges they face and the coping strategies they have adopted” (Lyngdoh Nonglailait, F., & Myrthong, D. E., 1963). North-East students face challenges while transitioning to colleges, especially as they move from their rural/hometown/state to the capital or other colleges in the *mainland* region (the term “Mainland India” is commonly used to refer to the adjoining Indian subcontinent, excluding the North-Eastern region of the country. Geographically, socially, and culturally, it distinguishes the rest of India from the northeastern states; the North-East region is connected to the mainland via a narrow strip of land called the *Siliguri Corridor* (often referred to as the ‘Chicken's Neck’). Students from this part of the region have been facing unique and multifaceted challenges, and some of the factors are administrative problems, student problems, socio-emotional and language barriers, limited infrastructure, and corruption within the government and the education department.

Administrative Problem:

An ongoing problem and challenge that students face directly or indirectly is the administrative problem with the State Board. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is the national-level board of education in India for public and private schools, administered and managed by the Government of India. The State Board accounts for the schools in the North-East region of India. For example, under the State Board, the Nagaland Board of School Education (NBSE) primarily focuses on education within the state. It evaluates and conducts the higher secondary school leaving certificate examinations under three streams – science, arts, and commerce. Its curriculum also includes cultural, local, historical, and linguistic studies of Nagaland, and the medium of instruction is English. The syllabi and grading of CBSE are comparatively easier than those of the



State Board of North-East India; therefore, students from North-East States face challenges when applying to other parts of Indian colleges and universities. The educational grading system in Northeast India, particularly Nagaland, presents a challenge for students seeking higher education outside their region, and few venture abroad. While students from Northeast India often demonstrate strong English language proficiency, they frequently receive more conservative grades under Nagaland's stringent evaluation system compared to their peers in other states in mainland India, who may score 90-95% despite limited English skills. This discrepancy creates significant barriers when North-East students apply to institutions in metropolitan areas or mainland states, where admission cutoffs are extremely competitive. Many qualified Naga students with solid academic achievements find themselves unable to secure admissions in other states due to this grading disparity. This situation highlights the need for reconsidering and potentially reforming Nagaland's educational assessment methods to ensure students from the region can compete fairly in the national and international higher education landscape.

The education system in the North-East faces a significant administrative challenge regarding syllabi and grading at the secondary and higher secondary levels. These need restructuring because the North-East curriculum is more demanding than the CBSE standard, creating an unfair disadvantage for students when they advance to college education. While students themselves present minimal issues, the real concern lies with the educational administration and its structural inefficiencies. The administration must prioritize addressing the significant challenge of consistently being unable to complete large portions of the syllabus before the academic year concludes.

The contrast in English language proficiency between North-East Indian students and those from mainland public schools highlights the significant impact of Christian missionaries, churches, and Jesuits on the region's educational landscape. The introduction of Christianity in the North-East exposed many residents to global perspectives and enabled them to develop functional English skills. This educational heritage stands in stark contrast to the majority of India's population, who predominantly communicate in Hindi across speaking, reading, and writing, creating an understandable but substantial divide in English literacy levels between these regions. The establishment of Christian educational institutions, missionaries, and churches played a major role in the development of education in the North-East region. Prof. Barrister Pakem, who was the first Vice Chancellor of North-Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya, in the 1970s, pointed out that "the prospects with Christian education offered to the people of North-East compensates for any of its shortcomings"; this was written during his study of the interaction between the people of North-East-India and Christianity. Moreover, in the past, tribal identity, traditions, and language were handed down primarily within the tribes' men and women, but the evangelization of Christianity made way for inter-tribal solidarity, implementation of the English language, national integration, and a new worldview. According to Rev. Fr. Dr. Joseph Anikuzhikattil Luka SDB, who was a professor at Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong, Meghalaya, and later, the rector of St. Anthony's College, Don Bosco Institution, pointed out:

Another way the Christian educational institutions nurtured tribal identity within the same group was through the standardization of their language. Often, it was the Christian missionaries who gave the script to many of these languages and wrote their first dictionary and grammar. Gradually, the same method was applied to different tribes by introducing English as a common medium of instruction in the schools. Thus, the Christian educational institutions were able to expand the relationships among the people of the Northeast from village to tribe, tribe to different tribes, and



finally to the nation at large. No wonder, then, today, many people from the region are prominent on the national scene, both in politics and in the bureaucracy (Anikuzhikattil, 2010, Para. 17).

In 2022, the Indian government submitted a report to the parliamentary committee on official languages, which said that it would make Hindi a compulsory language, particularly in North-East India, and this comes across as a monumental challenge and hindrance for quality education in the years ahead. According to *The Hindu*, a widely circulated Indian newspaper, reported that "the Center's move to make Hindi compulsory language in schools across the eight States in the North-East has miffed various organizations in the region. Describing Hindi as 'the language of India,' Home Minister Amit Shah said on Friday that Hindi would be a must for up to Class 10 in the region's schools. He also said that 22,000 teachers have been recruited to teach Hindi in the North-Eastern States" (Karmakar, 2022). This report also goes on to say that Hindi language speakers will "get priority in public offices, higher education institutions such as IIT's and IIMs, and in local courts" (Chatterji, 2022). Students from North-East India and other non-Hindi speaking groups who speak English and other regional languages will find it a hindrance when Hindi is imposed as a compulsory language/subject, especially in the education sector; therefore, the curriculum needs to be revised, and options given.

Students from North-East India encounter multifaceted challenges when transitioning to mainland colleges, with their difficulties compounded by governance issues at home. The ongoing protests that began in late 2024 and regained momentum again in April 2025 against backdoor appointments involving 147 positions in Nagaland's education department exemplify deeper systemic problems plaguing the region's educational infrastructure (Sharma, 2024; Nagaland to Revoke Order on Regularisation of 147 Contractual Posts," 2025). These demonstrations reflect widespread frustration with administrative dysfunction, political interference in recruitment processes, and endemic corruption that undermines meritocracy in educational institutions. According to Longkumer (2023), the absence of transparent selection procedures has created a parallel system where qualifications are frequently overshadowed by political connections and monetary transactions. This governance crisis directly impacts students' academic preparation, as qualified educators are systematically excluded from the teaching profession. The Eastern Mirror (2024) reports that appointment irregularities have become so normalized that they contribute to regional educational disparities and perpetuate employment inequalities. This growing movement against backdoor appointments represents a critical inflection point—a collective demand for governance reform, administrative accountability, and educational integrity. As reported by The Northeast Today (2025), addressing these structural inadequacies is essential not only for improving educational quality in Nagaland but also for ensuring North-Eastern students can compete equitably in national academic and professional environments. The protests thus serve as both a symptom and a potential catalyst for the systemic changes needed to transform educational governance and administrative problems in the region.

Student Problems:

Transitioning from school to college is an uphill journey for most of us. The transition phase can sometimes be a bit more challenging for rural students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since the North-East region is still a developing region, many students come from rural backgrounds. This paper will explore some of the factors affecting students from the state of Meghalaya and look into issues such as academic and socio-emotional challenges. With that said, the study conducted in the article was a qualitative exploratory study, which aimed to explore the



challenges faced by students from Meghalaya when making their transition into colleges in an urban setting and other parts of mainland India (Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021).

Rural students usually tend to receive less guidance from their parents and guardians regarding participation and readiness in higher education because, often, their parents are neither college-educated nor do they have formal education. Hence, they are less prepared than their urban counterparts. There have been studies that found that rural students may face difficulty while interacting with students and teachers because of the negative stereotype of being from a rural background. They fear that they will not fit in with the rest of the students and start to feel different from the other students during their transition as they move into a large urban college (Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021; Schultz, 2004). The study was conducted in 12 colleges affiliated with North-Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya. They identified 68 rural students who were selected to participate in the study and deployed a semi-structured interview schedule, which was used to collect data. Some of the findings about rural students making the transition into college were that they had a hard time coping with the new teacher's way of teaching and were not able to keep up with the pace. This is common among rural students during their initial years. One of the students pointed out, "when I first came into this college, I found it very difficult to adjust with the teachers. The teacher's way of teaching is not suitable for me as they are going very fast in their explanation and would teach a different topic every day..." (Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021, 1669). Some were not comfortable with large classroom sizes because rural schools tend to have smaller classrooms, and the teachers would know them by their names and give individual attention, unlike in big urban colleges. The other factor that posed a challenge was that they had to adapt to the semester system, which was different from the annual system followed in the higher secondary schools in North-East India. The students did mention that they were able to adjust to the semester system by the time they reached the second semester.

Student #1: The only thing difficult for me is that I cannot manage my time when I first joined college, as for the first time, we are following the semester system, where everything is going very fast. (1st Semester Student)

Student #2: We have so many assignments to finish. Therefore, I found it very difficult at first to manage my time, but now that I am in the 3rd semester, I have adjusted with the semester system. (3rd Semester Student). (Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021, P. 1670)

Many rural students from North-East India tend to experience isolation, homesickness, racial discrimination, stereotyping, economic challenges, and culture shock when they move to other states in mainland India. Since most of the participants had studied in small schools, they knew everybody in the class and school. However, as they transition into college, they must stand on their own, experience a new environment without any counseling or college preparedness, and are required to make new friends in a new environment. Rural students from North-East India usually tend to find themselves isolated because they are not welcomed wholeheartedly and looked down upon with suspicion. Pre and postCOVID-19, there were many instances in mainland India where North-East college students and working people were attacked, and many times, their lives were brutally taken. For example, Sebastian (2024) noted in her study that students from the North-East region often face discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping due to their different appearance, culture, and language (each tribe or their regional language is normally spoken among themselves). She points out that "there is a need of study into the challenges faced by North-Eastern students every day and so many examples [are] happening around it such as a young guy named *Nido Taniam* was beaten to death in Lajpat Nagar area of Delhi, the reason [was that] he



looked simply different in 2014. In 2016, two young guys from Mizoram were beaten in Bangalore for not speaking their local language. Public places deny them entry just because they don't look Indian enough. They are told to prove their nationality. These people are not given jobs or houses on the basis of their ethnicity or race. The problem is that we never talked about their culture and their stories, and they are not explored with the rest of India" (502).

This shows that there is indeed a real problem among North-East students who transition to colleges in other states in mainland India, and they are also unable to form new friendships easily. Furthermore, the participants in the study also pointed out that they found it difficult to make friends, especially in cities and urban colleges, due to their ways of lifestyles, styles of dressing, habits, behaviors, and talking. One of the participants pointed out, "I have difficulty making friends with the urban students as I feel shy around them. They are living a high-standard life, [for example] their way of dressing, and their way of behaving is very different from ours... I do not have the money to live like them" (Lyngdoh Nonglait & Myrthong, 2021, 1672). They would eventually stop making new friends and avoid being involved in extracurricular activities in college. This situation calls for collaborative action between the Indian government, state authorities, educational institutions, and transitioning students to develop comprehensive cultural orientation programs. Such initiatives would help students adapt to unfamiliar educational systems, cultural environments, and lifestyles as they enter new colleges, providing essential support during this critical transition period.

Women from North-East India:

When we look at the women's success rate of education in the North-East region and compare it to the rest of India, there is a remarkable progress in women's status in higher education (Jamir & Jamir, 2024). For example, women's literacy rate according to the *State-Wise Percentage of Female Literacy in North-East India*, according to the 2001 and 2011 Census, shows a higher increase in female literacy rate in North-East states compared to the rest of India. Mizoram has the highest female literacy rate of 86.8% and 89.3%. In Tripura, in 2001 was 64% and in 2011, it increased to 82.7%, whereas in all of India, in 2001 it was 53.7% and in 2011, it holds at 64.6%, which shows that female literacy rate in Tripura increased 20% but in India it was only 10% increase in the given 10 years of the census (Kumar & Shobana, 2022). In retrospect, women's right to education and their pursuit of higher education have significantly improved, but not to the best. When North-East female students transition from school to colleges in the Capital and other mainland Indian States, they often face many challenges as they transition to new cities and urban colleges in mainland India. For example, racial discrimination, lack of counseling, and college-preparedness, lack of understanding of other cultural etiquettes, to name a few. It is worth mentioning that there are numerous incidents of racial discrimination, racial profiling, harassment, and even deaths when it comes to North-East female students who go to colleges in Delhi and other mainland Indian States. Here are a few examples: the demise of Dana Sylvia Sangma, a Khasi student who took her life because the university in Delhi accused her of cheating in an exam; "two Naga students (from the state of Nagaland) who had been abused for hours by local men of Gurgaon on grounds that they (the students) do not belong there. They stated, 'If you northeast people come here, we will kill you.'" On March 22, 2020, a Manipuri student studying in Delhi coming back home from the grocery, was on her way home when a man labeled her 'corona' and spat on her body with chewed betel nut. Not surprisingly, the founder of *North-East Support Centre and Helpline*, Alana Golmei stated: "when it comes to racial abuse, each male and females are faced with it however women are more prone, due to the fact that perpetrators sense they can break out with it without entering into a fight. Of all the calls and lawsuits [I have] obtained, about 60 in lines came from ladies" (Lalrinawmi & Suchi, 2022, 7).



In conclusion, the challenges faced by students from North-East transitioning to colleges in other states in India probe for a deeper understanding and to bring about solutions and cope with the challenges. The study also shows that rural students faced two main obstacles: academic and socio-emotional challenges. There is a lack of career counseling and college-preparedness in the North-East region education sector, making the students vulnerable to many challenges as they venture into colleges outside their hometowns. Therefore, institutions and schools should invest in cultural sensitization programs, support networks, mentorship and counseling, financial aid, and subsidies to ease the burden and improve policies. Other reasons for this crisis are internal political problems, lack of infrastructure developments in education, lack of pre-college preparatory programs, administrative problems, and corruption in the government. Addressing these issues will ease the burden of the students in North-East India as they transition from school to college and bring about reforms in the overall education system in the region and the country.

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Article Received: 30/04/2025

Article Accepted: 13/05/2025

Published Online: 25/06/2025

To Cite the Article: Jamir, Jungshimanen. “Challenges Faced By Students From North-East India Transitioning To Higher Education Institutions” *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.- VI, Issue-1, June, 2025, 58-65. www.literarycognizance.com