



Educational Exclusion within Universal Elementary Education Policies in North East India: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) has been a central objective of India's development agenda, reflecting its constitutional commitment to social justice, equity, and democratic consolidation. Despite significant policy initiatives and legal reforms, regional and social disparities in educational outcomes continue to persist. This paper critically examines the trajectory of UEE in India with a specific focus on North East India, a region marked by distinctive geographical, socio-cultural, and institutional challenges. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of social exclusion, the study analyses educational exclusion as a multidimensional process that extends beyond issues of access to encompass participation, quality, and learning outcomes. Using a qualitative and descriptive research design, the paper is based on a systematic review and thematic analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, government reports, and evaluation studies related to elementary education and social exclusion. The findings reveal that while programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act have substantially improved enrolment, infrastructure, and formal access, these gains mask persistent regional and intra-regional inequalities. In the hill districts of North East India, educational exclusion increasingly manifests in "silent" and qualitative forms, where children are enrolled in schools but remain deprived of meaningful learning due to poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher preparation, linguistic barriers, and weak institutional capacity. Tribal, minority, and economically marginal communities, particularly first-generation learners and girls, are disproportionately affected by these intersecting disadvantages. The study also highlights gaps in policy implementation and existing research, notably the overemphasis on access indicators and the limited focus on learning processes and lived experiences in remote areas. The paper concludes that addressing educational exclusion in North East India requires a shift from an access-centric approach towards a holistic, context-sensitive strategy that integrates quality improvement, cultural and linguistic relevance, community engagement, and strengthened local institutions. Such an approach is essential for transforming elementary education into an effective instrument of social inclusion and human development.

Keywords: Universalisation of Elementary Education; Educational Exclusion; Social Exclusion; North East India; Hill Districts; Elementary Education Policy

Introduction

Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) has been widely recognised as a fundamental prerequisite for socio-economic development, social equity, and democratic consolidation in India. Education at the elementary level not only enhances individual capabilities but also strengthens human capital formation and social cohesion. Amartya Sen (1999) views elementary education as a critical component of capability expansion, enabling individuals to lead lives they value. Similarly, Dreze and Sen (2013) argue that universal access to basic education is indispensable for reducing long-term inequalities and ensuring inclusive growth.

The constitutional commitment to UEE, enshrined under Article 45 of the Indian Constitution, reflected the vision of the framers to make free and compulsory education a cornerstone of nation-building. However, Tilak (2006) observes that despite constitutional intent, the early post-independence period witnessed uneven progress due to limited public expenditure and weak institutional capacity at the state level. This unevenness became more pronounced in geographically remote and socio-politically sensitive regions such as North East India. Prior to 1976, the responsibility for elementary education lay almost entirely with the states, many of which faced acute financial and administrative constraints. Myron Weiner (1991) noted that regional disparities in educational development were deeply rooted in historical neglect, spatial isolation, and socio-cultural diversity. In North East India, difficult terrain, dispersed habitations, ethnic heterogeneity, and political instability further constrained educational outreach.

The inclusion of education in the Concurrent List through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment marked a major policy shift, enabling stronger central intervention. According to Govinda (2011), this change paved the way for nationally coordinated programmes aimed at universal access and quality improvement. The launch of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2002 and the subsequent enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, represented decisive steps towards transforming elementary education into a justiciable right. While SSA and RTE significantly improved enrolment, infrastructure, and retention indicators, educational exclusion continues to persist, particularly in the hill and border districts of North East India. Nambissan (2012) highlights that exclusion in education often assumes subtle forms, including poor-quality schooling, inadequate facilities, and limited learning outcomes. As observed by Ramachandran (2009), mere expansion of schooling does not automatically translate into meaningful inclusion. Against this context, the present paper reviews the concept of educational exclusion in North East India within the broader theoretical framework of social exclusion. It seeks to understand how structural, socio-cultural, and institutional factors interact to shape access to and participation in elementary education, with particular attention to hill districts of the region.

Review of Literatures

The concept of social exclusion provides a critical analytical lens for understanding persistent inequalities in education. René Lenoir (1974), who popularised the term, described social exclusion as the condition of individuals not protected by the welfare state. Building on this, Sen (2000) conceptualised exclusion as both constitutive and instrumental to capability deprivation, linking it directly to education, health, and livelihood outcomes. Silver (1994) identified three paradigms of social exclusion solidarity, specialization, and monopoly each rooted in distinct ideological traditions. These paradigms explain how exclusion may arise from breakdown of social bonds, discrimination within markets, or monopolisation of resources by dominant groups. Levitas (2005) further expanded the discourse by identifying redistributive, social integration, and moral underclass perspectives, highlighting how policy responses to exclusion shift over time.

In the Indian context, Thorat and Newman (2010) argue that social exclusion is deeply embedded in caste, ethnicity, and spatial inequalities. They note that marginalized communities often experience cumulative disadvantages, including limited access to quality education. Kabeer (2000) similarly emphasises that exclusion is a dynamic and relational process shaped by power structures operating across economic, social, and political domains. Educational exclusion, as a specific dimension of social exclusion, has been extensively discussed in the literature. Lewin (2007), through the CREATE framework, conceptualised multiple “Zones of Educational Exclusion,” ranging from children who never enrol to those silently excluded due to poor learning conditions. This framework has been widely applied in developing country contexts, including India. Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2011) observed that despite near-universal enrolment under SSA, many children remain excluded due to poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, and weak pedagogical practices. Nambissan (2010) highlighted that first-generation learners, especially in tribal and minority communities, are disproportionately affected by such qualitative exclusions.

Studies focusing on North East India reveal region-specific patterns of educational exclusion. Baruah (2012) noted that geographical isolation and scattered settlements pose serious challenges to school accessibility in hill districts. Singh (2015) found that inadequate infrastructure and high proportions of untrained teachers adversely affect retention and learning outcomes in Manipur’s hill areas. Similarly, De (2016) pointed out that linguistic diversity and lack of mother-tongue instruction contribute significantly to silent exclusion among tribal children. Ramachandran and Naorem (2018) emphasised that transition from primary to upper primary education remains a critical bottleneck in North East India, particularly for girls and children from economically weaker households. These studies collectively suggest that educational exclusion in the region is not merely a problem of access but one of quality, relevance, and institutional responsiveness. These literatures emphasise the need for a multidimensional, context-sensitive understanding of educational exclusion, particularly in socio-culturally diverse and geographically challenging regions such as North East India.

Objectives

The present study aims to comprehensively examine the trajectory of the Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) in India, with particular emphasis on the distinctive socio-cultural and geographical context of North East India. It seeks to explore the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of social exclusion and to establish their relevance in understanding exclusionary processes within the educational domain. A key objective of the paper is to analyse educational exclusion as a critical dimension of broader social exclusion, especially in relation to access, participation, and retention in elementary education. The study further intends to systematically review existing scholarly literature to identify prevailing patterns and diverse forms of educational exclusion in North East India, with special focus on hill districts. In doing so, it aims to identify and analyse the structural, socio-cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to educational deprivation and marginalisation in these regions. Another important objective is to critically assess the existing body of research in order to highlight conceptual, empirical, and regional gaps in the study of educational exclusion in North East India. Finally, the paper endeavours to generate policy-relevant insights and recommendations that can contribute to the formulation of more inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive strategies for strengthening elementary education in the region.

Materials and Methods

The present study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design grounded primarily in a systematic review and analytical synthesis of secondary sources. The materials for the study comprise published academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, government reports, commission reports, and evaluation studies related to Universalisation of Elementary Education, social exclusion, and educational exclusion in India, with particular reference to North East India. Key policy documents such as the Constitutional provisions, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) framework, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, form an important part of the material base. The study employs a conceptual and thematic analysis approach to examine how the notion of social exclusion has been theorised and applied in educational research, drawing upon established frameworks such as the capability approach and zones of educational exclusion. Relevant literature published between the early post-independence period and recent decades has been purposively selected to capture both historical evolution and contemporary debates. Particular emphasis is placed on studies focusing on hill districts of North East India in order to understand region-specific dynamics shaped by geography, ethnicity, language, and institutional capacity. The selected materials are analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, forms, and determinants of educational exclusion, including issues of access, quality, participation, and retention. Comparative insights are drawn across regions and policy phases to highlight continuities, changes, and gaps in existing research. Through this integrative method, the study seeks to generate a context-sensitive understanding of educational exclusion and to derive policy-relevant insights for promoting inclusive and equitable elementary education in North East India.

Analysis and Results

The present research reveals that the Universalisation of Elementary Education in India has achieved substantial quantitative expansion, particularly after the introduction of centrally sponsored programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the enactment of the RTE Act. Enrolment rates, school infrastructure, and teacher deployment have improved across most regions, including North East India. However, the findings indicate that these aggregate achievements conceal significant regional and intra-regional disparities. In the hill districts of North East India, access to elementary education continues to be constrained by structural factors such as difficult terrain, scattered settlements, inadequate transport facilities, and weak administrative outreach. Schools in remote areas often suffer from poor physical infrastructure, irregular teacher attendance, and limited availability of learning materials. As a result, while formal access has expanded, effective participation remains uneven, confirming the argument that universalisation in numerical terms does not necessarily translate into substantive educational inclusion.

A key result emerging from the thematic analysis is that educational exclusion in North East India largely manifests in qualitative and “silent” forms rather than outright denial of schooling. Drawing on the social exclusion framework, the study finds that many children, particularly from tribal, minority, and economically marginal households, are enrolled in schools but remain excluded from meaningful learning processes. Poor pedagogical practices, language barriers due to lack of mother-tongue instruction, high teacher–pupil ratios, and limited contextual relevance of curricula contribute to low learning outcomes and grade repetition. These factors disproportionately affect first-generation learners, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage. Gender and economic status further intersect with geography, making transitions from primary to upper primary education a critical point of exclusion, especially for girls in hill districts. The findings thus support the view that educational exclusion in the region is multidimensional, shaped by the interaction of social identity, spatial disadvantage, and institutional weaknesses.

The analysis also highlights significant gaps in policy implementation and research focus. While national policies emphasise equity and inclusion, their uniform design often fails to adequately address the region-specific realities of North East India. Institutional capacity at the local level remains weak, limiting the effective adaptation of centrally designed programmes to local socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, existing research has tended to focus more on access and enrolment indicators, with relatively limited attention to

quality, learning outcomes, and everyday school experiences in remote hill areas. This review-based analysis identifies a need for more disaggregated, context-sensitive studies that capture the lived realities of children and communities facing educational exclusion. Overall, the results suggest that addressing educational exclusion in North East India requires moving beyond an access-centric approach towards a holistic strategy that integrates quality improvement, cultural and linguistic sensitivity, community engagement, and strengthened local institutions. Such an approach is essential for transforming elementary education into a genuinely inclusive instrument of social justice and human development in the region.

Discussion

The findings of the present study reinforce and extend existing scholarly arguments that while India has made notable progress towards the Universalisation of Elementary Education, the outcomes remain uneven and deeply stratified across regions and social groups. Consistent with Sen's (1999) capability approach, the results suggest that mere physical access to schooling does not automatically translate into meaningful capability expansion. In the hill districts of North East India, the persistence of difficult terrain, scattered settlements, and weak administrative capacity continues to limit effective participation in elementary education. These findings echo Weiner's (1991) observation that historical neglect and spatial isolation play a decisive role in shaping regional disparities in educational development. Despite the constitutional mandate and increased central involvement after the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, the capacity of state and local institutions to deliver equitable educational outcomes remains constrained, validating Tilak's (2006) argument regarding the enduring impact of fiscal and institutional limitations. The discussion further highlights that educational exclusion in North East India is predominantly qualitative in nature, manifesting through what Nambissan (2012) terms "subtle" or "silent" forms of exclusion. The evidence that many children are enrolled but fail to acquire foundational learning skills aligns closely with Lewin's (2007) CREATE framework, particularly the zones of exclusion that capture children who are nominally included in schools but excluded from meaningful learning. Poor infrastructure, untrained or irregular teachers, and language barriers significantly undermine learning outcomes, especially for first-generation learners from tribal and minority communities. This supports Govinda and Bandyopadhyay's (2011) contention that near-universal enrolment under SSA masks deeper qualitative deficits within the schooling system. The lack of mother-tongue instruction, as highlighted in the findings, also corroborates De's (2016) work, which demonstrates how linguistic mismatch between home and school environments contributes to alienation and low achievement among tribal children.

The multidimensional nature of exclusion observed in the study resonates strongly with broader theories of social exclusion. Sen's (2000) distinction between constitutive and instrumental exclusion is particularly relevant here, as educational deprivation both reflects and reinforces broader capability deprivations related to health, livelihood, and social participation. Similarly, Kabeer's (2000) emphasis on exclusion as a dynamic and relational process helps explain how social identity, geography, and institutional practices intersect to produce cumulative disadvantage in hill districts. The findings also align with Thorat and Newman's (2010) analysis of caste, ethnicity, and spatial inequalities in India, suggesting that educational exclusion in North East India cannot be viewed in isolation from entrenched socio-economic and cultural hierarchies. Gendered dimensions of exclusion, particularly during the transition from primary to upper primary education, further deepen the discussion. The results corroborate Ramachandran and Naorem's (2018) assertion that transition points constitute critical bottlenecks, especially for girls and children from economically weaker households. This indicates that policies focused primarily on enrolment and infrastructure expansion are insufficient to address retention and progression challenges. As Ramachandran (2009) cautions, schooling expansion without attention to quality, relevance, and supportive institutional environments risks reproducing inequality rather than mitigating it. Finally, the discussion points to significant policy and research gaps that mirror concerns raised in earlier studies. While national frameworks such as SSA and RTE embody a redistributive and rights-based vision, as noted by Levitas (2005), their largely uniform design often overlooks regional diversity and local needs. The limited focus on learning outcomes, classroom processes, and lived experiences in existing research further constrains evidence-based policy making. In line with Baruah (2012) and Singh (2015), the present findings underscore the need for context-sensitive strategies that prioritise teacher training, linguistic inclusion, community engagement, and institutional strengthening at the local level. Overall, the discussion suggests that achieving genuine educational inclusion in North East India requires reimagining UEE not merely as a project of access, but as a comprehensive social process aimed at equity, quality, and meaningful participation, firmly grounded in the region's socio-cultural realities.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that while India's commitment to the Universalisation of Elementary Education has resulted in substantial quantitative progress, particularly in terms of enrolment expansion, school infrastructure, and legal entitlements, these achievements have not translated into uniform or meaningful educational inclusion across all regions. In North East India, especially in the hill districts, educational

exclusion persists as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by geography, socio-cultural diversity, and institutional constraints. The analysis demonstrates that exclusion is no longer primarily a matter of school non-availability, but increasingly takes the form of “silent” and qualitative deprivation, where children remain formally enrolled yet are unable to fully participate in or benefit from the learning process. Structural barriers such as difficult terrain and dispersed settlements, combined with language barriers, weak pedagogical practices, and inadequate institutional capacity, continue to undermine learning outcomes and retention. These findings reaffirm that universalisation, when understood narrowly in terms of access, is insufficient to address deeper inequalities in educational opportunity and capability development. In light of these conclusions, the paper underscores the need to reconceptualise UEE in North East India through a more holistic and context-sensitive framework that integrates access, quality, relevance, and equity. Policies and programmes must move beyond uniform, centrally designed interventions and instead incorporate region-specific strategies that respond to local socio-cultural realities, linguistic diversity, and geographical challenges. Strengthening teacher training, promoting mother-tongue-based multilingual education, improving school infrastructure in remote areas, and enhancing local institutional capacity emerge as critical priorities for reducing educational exclusion. Furthermore, greater emphasis on research that captures learning processes, classroom experiences, and the lived realities of marginalised communities is essential for informed policy formulation. Ultimately, achieving genuine universalisation of elementary education in North East India requires treating education not merely as a service to be delivered, but as a transformative social process central to social justice, human development, and democratic inclusion.

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