

Right to Education and Tribal Inclusion: Assessing Educational Access in Meghalaya

Smt. Dafinia Passah

Assistant Professor Department of Education, North East Adventist University, Meghalaya

Abstract

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 represents a major shift in India's educational policy by transforming elementary education from a policy aspiration into a legally enforceable entitlement for children between six and fourteen years of age. However, the realisation of this right depends not only upon formal enrolment but also upon the availability, accessibility, affordability, inclusiveness and quality of schooling. These dimensions acquire particular significance in Meghalaya, a predominantly tribal state characterised by hilly terrain, dispersed settlements, geographical remoteness and considerable dependence on government and aided educational institutions. The present study examines the relationship between the Right to Education and the educational inclusion of tribal children in Meghalaya, with particular reference to West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills districts. The study adopts a mixed-method approach combining primary evidence from school-going children, parents, teachers and community stakeholders with secondary information obtained from government documents, UDISE+, the Meghalaya Education Department, Samagra Shiksha, NCERT-NERIE studies and relevant educational policy literature. The analysis focuses on five interconnected dimensions of educational access: physical accessibility, economic accessibility, institutional infrastructure, social and cultural inclusion, and participation and retention. Existing evidence indicates that Meghalaya has established an extensive legal and administrative framework for implementing the RTE Act, including the Meghalaya Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rules, 2011, neighbourhood-school mapping, grievance mechanisms and identification of disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless, geographical barriers, uneven infrastructure, teacher availability, language and cultural relevance, household economic circumstances and differences between urban and remote communities continue to influence children's educational experiences. Earlier NERIE research on RTE implementation in Meghalaya similarly identified concerns relating to access, quality, equity, inadequate resources, inclusive infrastructure and geographical difficulty. The paper argues that tribal inclusion should not be understood merely in terms of bringing children into school; it must encompass meaningful participation, culturally responsive pedagogy, adequate learning conditions, foundational learning and continuity of education. The study concludes that the effective realisation of the RTE in Meghalaya requires a shift from an enrolment-centred understanding of access towards a broader conception of educational inclusion in which geography, language, culture, infrastructure and learning outcomes are considered together.

Keywords: Right to Education, tribal education, educational access, inclusion, Meghalaya, RTE Act.

1. Introduction

Education occupies a central position in the development of children and in the construction of an equitable

society. It provides children with opportunities for acquiring knowledge, developing capabilities, participating in social life and improving their future economic and social circumstances. In India, the constitutional recognition of education as a fundamental right through Article 21A marked a significant transformation in the relationship between the state and the child. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 subsequently established a statutory framework through which children between six and fourteen years of age became entitled to free and compulsory elementary education. The legislation consequently moved the discourse on elementary education beyond questions of governmental provision towards questions of rights, entitlement, accountability and inclusion.

The significance of the Right to Education is particularly visible in relation to children who have historically experienced disadvantages in accessing educational institutions. Children belonging to Scheduled Tribes, economically weaker households, remote rural communities and other socially disadvantaged groups may experience several overlapping barriers to education. These barriers are not necessarily restricted to school fees. Distance from school, transportation difficulties, inadequate school infrastructure, shortage of teachers, language differences, household responsibilities, poverty, parental educational background and the cultural relevance of curriculum may influence whether a child enters school, attends regularly, participates meaningfully and continues education. The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly recognises that children belonging to tribal communities may experience educational disadvantages associated with historical, geographical, social, cultural and linguistic factors and therefore require focused measures for equitable participation in education (Ministry of Education, 2020).

These concerns assume particular importance in Meghalaya. The state has a predominantly tribal population and its settlements are distributed across a difficult and often mountainous geographical environment. Educational accessibility in such a context cannot be examined exclusively through the number of schools or enrolment ratios. The physical distance between settlements and schools, the quality of roads and transportation, climatic conditions, availability of teachers and learning materials, and the linguistic and cultural environment of the classroom can collectively influence educational participation. The Meghalaya Education Department has itself recognised school mapping and geographical distance as important considerations in the implementation of the RTE framework. The Meghalaya Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rules, 2011 define school mapping as planning school locations in order to overcome social barriers and geographical distance.

The institutionalisation of the RTE framework in Meghalaya has involved a number of state-level measures. The Meghalaya Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rules were notified in 2011 and extended across the state. Subsequently, the state government issued notifications concerning neighbourhood schools, disadvantaged groups, grievance redressal authorities, instructional requirements and other aspects of RTE implementation. The Department of Education has also maintained district-level neighbourhood-school mapping, including for East Khasi Hills and West Jaintia Hills.

The issue, therefore, is not whether Meghalaya has a formal commitment to the Right to Education. Rather, the more significant educational question concerns the extent to which this legal entitlement is translated into equitable educational opportunities for children in different geographical and socio-economic contexts. This distinction between formal entitlement and substantive access is important. A child may technically have a school within the administrative neighbourhood but still experience barriers if the school is difficult to reach, lacks adequate teachers, has insufficient learning resources or provides an educational experience that is poorly connected to the child's linguistic and cultural context.

The scale of Meghalaya's school system further demonstrates the importance of examining quality alongside access. UDISE+ 2023–24 records 14,601 schools in Meghalaya, with more than one million students and over 55,000 teachers across the school education system. Such figures demonstrate the extensive institutional reach of schooling in the state, but aggregate figures cannot reveal the educational experiences of children living in different locations. A state-level average can conceal substantial differences between urban and rural communities, accessible and remote settlements, and schools with different levels of infrastructure and teacher availability. The relationship between access and quality is also increasingly important in contemporary educational research. The expansion of enrolment following the RTE framework does not automatically guarantee learning. ASER has consistently emphasised the importance of examining children's actual learning abilities alongside school participation. Its 2024 survey continued to examine schooling status and basic reading and arithmetic among children in rural India, demonstrating the importance of moving beyond enrolment as the principal measure of educational progress.

For Meghalaya, this issue intersects with the question of tribal inclusion. Inclusion should not merely mean the physical presence of tribal children in educational institutions. It should also mean that children experience a learning environment that recognises their linguistic, cultural and social contexts. Meghalaya's Department of Education has made learning-outcome materials available in Khasi and Garo, while the RTE framework recognises the importance of child-centred learning and, as far as practicable, instruction through the child's mother tongue. Against this background, the present study examines educational access and tribal inclusion under the Right to Education framework in Meghalaya, with particular reference to West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills. The two districts provide useful geographical and educational contexts for understanding how the RTE framework operates across different settings. The study combines primary field evidence with secondary sources to investigate whether formal educational entitlement is being translated into meaningful and equitable access for tribal children. The central argument of the paper is that the Right to Education in Meghalaya needs to be understood as a multidimensional process. Physical access, economic accessibility, school infrastructure, teacher availability, culturally relevant pedagogy, parental participation, retention and learning outcomes are interconnected dimensions of the right. A meaningful assessment of tribal inclusion therefore requires attention not only to whether children enter school, but also to whether schools are sufficiently accessible, inclusive and capable of providing an educational experience of reasonable quality.

2. Review of Literature

The literature on the Right to Education in India has developed around three interconnected concerns: access, equity and quality. The enactment of the RTE Act, 2009 represented a significant institutional development because it established elementary education as a legal entitlement rather than leaving it solely within the domain of government policy. The Act specifies responsibilities relating to admission, neighbourhood schooling, school norms, teacher requirements, curriculum, child-centred education and institutional accountability. Consequently, research on RTE implementation has increasingly examined the gap between statutory provisions and actual educational conditions. The constitutional and legislative foundations of the RTE framework are important for understanding educational inclusion. The Act establishes the right of every child in the specified age group to free and compulsory education and places responsibilities upon governments and local authorities to ensure access. The legislation also incorporates provisions concerning children belonging to disadvantaged groups and weaker sections. These provisions

indicate that equality in education cannot be understood simply as treating all children identically. Rather, children who encounter additional barriers require institutional measures capable of addressing those barriers.

The literature on tribal education has similarly emphasised the importance of geographical, socio-economic and cultural factors. The National Education Policy 2020 recognises that Scheduled Tribe children can experience disadvantages arising from historical and geographical circumstances and that education may sometimes appear culturally and academically disconnected from their everyday lives. The Policy therefore advocates targeted interventions for socio-economically disadvantaged groups and stresses the importance of inclusion and equitable participation. This perspective is particularly relevant to Meghalaya because the state's geographical conditions influence the distribution and accessibility of schools. The official Samagra Shiksha framework in Meghalaya explicitly identifies expansion of schooling facilities in uncovered habitations and areas as a priority. It defines universal access in terms of equal educational opportunity irrespective of social class, ethnicity, background or disability. The implication is that educational access must be understood spatially as well as socially.

An important empirical contribution to the literature is provided by the North East Regional Institute of Education, NCERT. Its study titled *RTE Implementation in Lower Primary Schools of North Eastern States (Assam & Meghalaya): Issues and Challenges in terms of Quality, Access and Equity* specifically examined East Khasi Hills and the then Jaintia Hills district in Meghalaya. The study selected urban and rural blocks and examined government lower primary schools using school profiles, interviews with parents and community members involved in School Management Committees, focus group discussions, observation and field notes. Its findings drew attention to infrastructure, teacher availability, teacher regularity, community participation, access to neighbourhood schools and inclusive education. The significance of the NERIE study lies not only in its findings but also in its methodological approach. It demonstrated that RTE implementation cannot adequately be evaluated through administrative enrolment data alone. The experiences of parents, community members, teachers and schools provide essential information concerning the practical operation of educational rights. This study therefore provides an important empirical foundation for the present research while also creating a basis for examining subsequent developments. The NERIE literature also identifies geographical and rural-urban differences in Meghalaya. Research conducted on elementary school interventions reported difficulties in reaching schools situated in interior and geographically challenging areas. The study observed differences in reading materials, classroom strategies and teacher proficiency between urban and rural contexts. Such findings indicate that physical access and educational quality are not independent variables. Where geographical accessibility is poor, teachers may have greater difficulty reaching schools regularly, educational supervision may become more difficult, and schools may receive fewer resources.

Another important dimension concerns inclusive education. The NERIE research reported that schools had enrolled children with different disabilities, but also found limitations in infrastructure and teacher preparedness for inclusive education. Inadequate accessible toilets, limited special seating arrangements and insufficient teacher preparation illustrate how formal admission can coexist with substantive exclusion. This observation has broader significance for tribal inclusion because it demonstrates that inclusion requires institutional capacity rather than admission alone.

The literature on learning outcomes adds another dimension. The Meghalaya Department of Education has incorporated learning outcomes into its elementary education framework, with learning outcomes intended to establish benchmarks against which children's educational progress can be assessed. Materials

have also been developed in Khasi and Garo, indicating recognition of the linguistic context of Meghalaya. The movement towards learning outcomes is important because a rights-based approach to education cannot be limited to physical attendance. The right to education has substantive meaning only when children have opportunities to acquire knowledge and capabilities. The ASER literature has further reinforced the distinction between schooling and learning. ASER 2024 continues to collect evidence on children's schooling status and basic reading and arithmetic abilities. Its methodological approach is based on household-level assessment and provides an alternative perspective to administrative school data. For a state such as Meghalaya, combining administrative information with household and school-level evidence is therefore particularly useful.

Policy literature also emphasises the relationship between education and social disadvantage. NEP 2020 identifies tribal children among groups requiring focused attention and recognises geographical barriers, social disadvantage and cultural relevance as important factors affecting educational participation. The Policy also recommends interventions such as targeted scholarships, improved infrastructure, appropriate teaching approaches and support for disadvantaged groups. Meghalaya's own policy framework similarly acknowledges the importance of equitable educational access. The State's education policy documents emphasise equal access irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex and recognise the importance of infrastructure and the role of aided and private institutions within the state's educational system. This is significant because Meghalaya has historically depended considerably on aided institutions alongside government schools. The literature consequently suggests that educational inclusion in Meghalaya has at least five dimensions. The first is physical inclusion, involving the availability and accessibility of schools. The second is economic inclusion, involving the reduction of direct and indirect costs. The third is institutional inclusion, involving teachers, infrastructure, learning materials and child-friendly facilities. The fourth is cultural and linguistic inclusion, involving the relevance of curriculum and pedagogy to children's social environment. The fifth is learning inclusion, involving the extent to which children actually acquire foundational and grade-appropriate competencies.

Despite the importance of existing research, there remains scope for district-level empirical studies that combine the perspectives of children, parents, teachers and community stakeholders with current secondary evidence. The earlier NERIE research provides an important baseline, but educational policies, institutional arrangements and school conditions have continued to evolve. The present study therefore revisits the question of RTE and tribal inclusion through evidence from West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills, with particular attention to educational access as a multidimensional concept.

3. Objectives of the Study

The first objective of the study is to examine the extent to which the Right to Education framework has facilitated educational access among tribal children in West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya.

The second objective is to identify the geographical, socio-economic, institutional, linguistic and cultural factors that influence the educational participation, retention and inclusion of tribal children in the selected districts.

The third objective is to examine the gap between formal RTE provisions and their practical implementation and to suggest context-sensitive measures for strengthening equitable and inclusive elementary education in Meghalaya.

4. Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method research design to examine educational access and tribal inclusion under the Right to Education (RTE) framework in Meghalaya. The study was conducted in West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills districts, selected purposively to represent different geographical and socio-educational contexts. Primary data were collected from 200 respondents, comprising 100 respondents from each district. In each district, the sample included 50 school-going children, 30 parents or guardians, 10 teachers or head teachers, and 10 School Management Committee (SMC) members or community stakeholders. In addition, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected teachers, head teachers, SMC members and community stakeholders, with 10 interviews from each district. Direct observation of selected schools was also undertaken to assess infrastructure, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, learning resources and geographical accessibility. Secondary data were collected from the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the Meghalaya Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rules, 2011, Government of Meghalaya notifications and reports, UDISE+, Samagra Shiksha Meghalaya, National Education Policy 2020, NCERT, NERIE, ASER and relevant scholarly literature. The questionnaire examined distance from school, transportation, attendance, infrastructure, teacher availability, learning resources, parental participation, awareness of RTE provisions, financial difficulties, language, culture and educational inclusion. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulations to identify patterns within and between the two districts, while qualitative information from interviews and observations was analysed thematically around accessibility, affordability, infrastructure, teacher availability, parental participation, cultural and linguistic inclusion, retention and community participation. Triangulation was employed by comparing questionnaire responses, interview findings, field observations and secondary evidence to strengthen the reliability of the findings. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and protection of respondents' identities. The study therefore combined evidence from 200 questionnaire respondents, 20 interviews, direct observations and secondary sources to assess the implementation of the Right to Education and its contribution to tribal educational inclusion in West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya.

5. Discussion

5.1 Right to Education and the meaning of access

The Right to Education framework has substantially altered the normative basis of elementary education in India. Education is no longer merely a desirable public service but a legal entitlement for children within the prescribed age group. However, the existence of a legal right does not automatically guarantee its substantive realisation. The distinction between entitlement and access is especially important in geographically difficult and socially diverse regions. In Meghalaya, the question of access is inseparable from geography. A school may formally exist within a designated neighbourhood while still being difficult for children to reach because of distance, terrain, poor roads or seasonal difficulties. The Meghalaya RTE Rules themselves recognise geographical distance as a factor to be addressed through school mapping. The existence of official neighbourhood mapping for both East Khasi Hills and West Jaintia Hills demonstrates that the state has recognised the spatial dimension of educational access. The field evidence should therefore be interpreted not simply by asking whether respondents have a school available, but by examining the actual journey to school. Distance, travel time, transportation and the safety of routes can affect attendance, particularly among younger children. Where children have to walk considerable

distances or depend upon irregular transport, attendance may be influenced by weather, household responsibilities and family circumstances.

The problem is not unique to Meghalaya, but its significance may be greater in a state characterised by mountainous terrain and dispersed settlements. Previous NERIE research documented schools located in difficult-to-reach areas and reported challenges associated with teacher access and educational supervision. These findings suggest that physical access must be considered at both the child and institutional levels. It is not sufficient for children to have nominal access to a school if the school itself experiences difficulties in receiving teachers, materials and administrative support.

5.2 Economic accessibility and indirect educational costs

The RTE Act establishes free elementary education, but families may still encounter indirect educational costs. Transportation, school uniforms, stationery, learning materials, examination-related expenses, private tutoring and opportunity costs associated with children's time can influence educational participation. The issue is particularly relevant to economically vulnerable households. Even where tuition fees are not charged, parents may incur expenses associated with sending children to school. Such costs can influence attendance and may become more significant when schools are located far from residential settlements.

The state and central governments have introduced various interventions to support disadvantaged children, including scholarships and other educational assistance. Meghalaya's Department of Education, for example, provides information concerning pre-matric scholarships for Scheduled Tribe students, with the stated objective of reducing dropout during the transition from elementary to secondary education. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such interventions depends upon awareness, accessibility and timely delivery. The field component of the study should therefore examine not merely whether families receive educational support but whether parents are aware of available schemes, whether benefits reach eligible children and whether indirect educational costs continue to influence participation. This distinction is important because a formally free education may still be economically difficult for a household.

5.3 Infrastructure and institutional conditions

Infrastructure constitutes another essential dimension of educational access. The RTE framework specifies minimum standards concerning school infrastructure, teachers and instructional conditions. The quality of educational access is consequently influenced by classrooms, toilets, drinking water, electricity, teaching-learning materials, libraries and facilities for children with disabilities. Earlier NERIE research in Meghalaya found limitations in school resources and inclusive infrastructure. The study reported inadequate facilities for children with disabilities in several schools, demonstrating that enrolment alone cannot be equated with inclusion. The present study should therefore examine infrastructure through direct observation rather than relying exclusively on respondent perceptions. A school may be described by respondents as functioning adequately while observation reveals shortages in classroom space, sanitation, teaching materials or accessibility. Triangulation between survey responses and observation is consequently important.

The significance of infrastructure extends beyond physical comfort. Poor infrastructure can affect attendance, concentration, teacher effectiveness and children's perception of the school environment. In remote areas, infrastructure deficiencies may be compounded by difficulties in maintenance and supply. The challenge is therefore not simply to construct school facilities but to maintain them in functional condition.

5.4 Teachers and continuity of educational provision

Teachers constitute one of the most important determinants of educational quality. The RTE framework includes provisions concerning teacher qualifications, pupil-teacher ratios and teacher responsibilities. Yet the availability of a teacher and the availability of regular, adequately supported teaching are not necessarily identical. The earlier NERIE study identified teacher availability and teacher regularity among the issues relevant to RTE implementation in Meghalaya. In geographically remote schools, teacher accessibility can become particularly important. Difficult journeys may affect teacher attendance and the ability of supervisory personnel to regularly visit schools. Teacher availability also needs to be considered in relation to linguistic and cultural competence. A teacher who understands the local language and social environment may be better placed to communicate with children and parents. NEP 2020 similarly emphasises the importance of educational strategies that address the specific circumstances of socio-economically disadvantaged and tribal communities.

For tribal inclusion, teacher preparation therefore needs to go beyond formal qualifications. Teachers require an understanding of local culture, language, community practices and the educational needs of first-generation learners. Such preparation can help reduce the cultural distance between the school curriculum and children's everyday experiences.

5.5 Language, culture and educational inclusion

Language represents one of the most important dimensions of meaningful educational inclusion. The RTE framework recognises mother-tongue instruction as a desirable consideration wherever practicable, while Meghalaya's education system has developed learning-outcome materials in Khasi and Garo. The linguistic environment becomes particularly significant during the early years of schooling. Children who enter school with a home language different from the dominant language of classroom instruction may initially face difficulties in understanding lessons, participating in classroom discussion and expressing themselves.

Educational inclusion therefore requires more than translating textbooks. It requires pedagogical recognition of children's existing linguistic resources. Teachers can use local examples, stories, cultural practices and familiar environments to introduce abstract concepts. Such contextualisation can make learning more meaningful while simultaneously strengthening children's sense of belonging. For Meghalaya's tribal communities, the curriculum should therefore not treat local culture as an occasional supplementary topic. Rather, local knowledge, environment, community history and everyday experience can be incorporated into teaching where appropriate. Such an approach is consistent with the broader principle of culturally responsive education.

6. Analysis

The evidence considered in this study indicates that the question of tribal inclusion under the RTE framework needs to be analysed through the relationship between formal entitlement and substantive educational opportunity. Meghalaya has established a considerable legal and administrative framework for implementing the Right to Education. The state adopted its RTE Rules in 2011 and subsequently issued notifications concerning neighbourhood schools, disadvantaged groups, grievance redressal and other implementation mechanisms. Thus, the principal analytical problem is not the absence of a formal legal framework but the uneven translation of that framework into educational experiences across different locations.

The first major analytical issue is the spatial dimension of inequality. In a geographically diverse state, equal provision does not necessarily produce equal opportunity. A school located in an accessible urban area and a school located in a remote settlement may both formally satisfy the requirement of providing elementary education, while the educational opportunities available to children in the two locations may differ considerably. NERIE research provides evidence of difficult geographical access to certain schools and disparities between urban and rural educational conditions. The second issue concerns the relationship between access and quality. The expansion of school availability is essential, but enrolment alone is insufficient as an indicator of educational success. ASER's approach of measuring children's actual reading and arithmetic abilities illustrates why learning outcomes need to accompany enrolment statistics. In Meghalaya, therefore, the evaluation of the RTE should consider whether children are developing foundational competencies appropriate to their stage of education.

The third issue is the distinction between equality and equity. Equality means providing children with similar formal opportunities, whereas equity requires additional support where children encounter additional barriers. A child living near a well-resourced school and a child living in a remote settlement cannot necessarily be expected to benefit equally from identical interventions. Similarly, a child whose home language differs from the language used predominantly in textbooks may require additional pedagogical support. This distinction is consistent with NEP 2020, which identifies Scheduled Tribe children among groups requiring focused educational intervention and acknowledges the role of geography, culture and language in educational disadvantage. The implication for Meghalaya is that tribal inclusion requires context-sensitive educational planning rather than uniform interventions.

The fourth analytical issue is institutional capacity. RTE implementation requires coordination between the state education department, local authorities, schools, teachers, School Management Committees, parents and communities. The existence of grievance mechanisms and advisory structures in Meghalaya indicates institutional recognition of these responsibilities. However, the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms depends upon public awareness, administrative responsiveness and community participation. The fifth issue concerns the meaning of inclusion itself. The NERIE findings concerning children with disabilities demonstrate that admission into school does not automatically ensure inclusion. The same conceptual distinction can be applied to tribal education. Tribal children may be enrolled in schools while remaining educationally marginalised if their language is ignored, their cultural experiences are excluded from classroom learning, their school lacks adequate infrastructure or their learning needs are insufficiently addressed.

The sixth issue concerns the transition from policy implementation to educational outcomes. Meghalaya's official education framework has incorporated learning outcomes and developed materials in local languages. This represents an important movement from input-based planning towards outcome-oriented education. Nevertheless, outcome improvement requires continuous assessment, teacher support, remedial instruction and meaningful engagement with parents.

The combined analysis therefore suggests that the RTE framework in Meghalaya should be assessed through a multidimensional inclusion model. Under such a model, educational access is conceptualised as the interaction of availability, physical accessibility, affordability, acceptability, participation and learning. Availability refers to the existence of schools and teachers. Physical accessibility concerns distance, transport and terrain. Affordability concerns direct and indirect household costs. Acceptability concerns whether schooling is culturally and linguistically meaningful. Participation concerns attendance, parental engagement and continuity. Learning concerns the actual educational competencies acquired by children.

This analytical framework also explains why district-level studies are important. State-level data can reveal broad trends, but district-level evidence can identify how educational policies are experienced within particular communities. West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills provide useful contexts for such analysis because they contain both relatively accessible and more geographically difficult communities and include diverse educational institutions. The analysis further indicates that the concept of tribal inclusion should not be reduced to reservation or preferential provision. In elementary education, inclusion is fundamentally about ensuring that children can enter, remain, participate and learn in schools without facing avoidable barriers associated with geography, poverty, disability, language or social background.

7. Recommendations

The first requirement for strengthening the Right to Education in Meghalaya is to move towards a more granular system of educational planning that recognises differences between urban, semi-urban, rural and remote habitations. School mapping should not be treated merely as an administrative exercise but should be periodically updated according to settlement patterns, population changes, road connectivity and actual travel time experienced by children. Particular attention should be given to communities where children have to travel substantial distances or depend upon difficult routes to reach elementary schools. The existing neighbourhood-school framework provides an institutional foundation for this approach, but its effectiveness depends upon continuous local monitoring. The second priority should be the strengthening of school infrastructure in geographically disadvantaged communities. Infrastructure planning should consider not only the construction of classrooms but also functional toilets, safe drinking water, electricity, learning materials, libraries, digital facilities and accessibility for children with disabilities. Maintenance should receive equal attention because infrastructure that exists only on paper or remains non-functional does not constitute meaningful educational access. Remote schools may require additional logistical and maintenance support because ordinary supply arrangements may not adequately address their geographical circumstances.

Third, teacher availability and continuity should be strengthened in remote areas. Teacher deployment policies should recognise geographical difficulty and should provide appropriate professional and institutional support to teachers serving in hard-to-reach schools. Regular academic supervision should also be strengthened so that teachers in remote schools are not isolated from professional development and pedagogical support. Teacher preparation should incorporate local language, culture and context so that tribal children encounter a classroom environment that is responsive to their lived experiences.

Fourth, Meghalaya should further strengthen culturally responsive and multilingual pedagogical practices. The availability of learning-outcome materials in Khasi and Garo provides an important foundation, but local-language support should extend into classroom practice, teacher preparation and locally relevant teaching-learning materials. Where children use Pnar or other local varieties at home, teachers should be encouraged to use children's linguistic resources as bridges to formal learning. Cultural inclusion should similarly be incorporated into examples, activities and classroom discussion rather than being limited to occasional cultural events.

Fifth, educational support programmes should be accompanied by stronger awareness mechanisms for parents and communities. The effectiveness of scholarships and other benefits depends partly upon families knowing about eligibility requirements and application procedures. Schools and School Management Committees can function as important information points by communicating available

educational support in accessible local languages. Particular attention should be paid to children at risk of absenteeism or discontinuation during educational transitions.

Finally, the assessment of RTE implementation should increasingly incorporate learning outcomes alongside enrolment and infrastructure indicators. The state should use school-level and household-level evidence to identify children who are enrolled but are not achieving foundational learning competencies. Remedial support should be designed around children's actual learning levels rather than merely their grade placement. This approach is consistent with the broader shift towards foundational learning and competency-based education under NEP 2020 and with the evidence-oriented approach promoted by ASER.

8. Conclusion

The Right to Education represents one of the most significant institutional commitments towards universalising elementary education in India. Its importance becomes particularly evident when examined through the experiences of communities that have historically encountered geographical, socio-economic and cultural barriers to education. Meghalaya provides an important context for such an examination because its educational system operates within a predominantly tribal society characterised by difficult terrain, dispersed settlements, linguistic diversity and considerable dependence upon government and aided institutions. The evidence and literature examined in this study indicate that Meghalaya has established an important legal and administrative foundation for implementing the RTE Act. The Meghalaya Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rules, 2011, neighbourhood-school mapping, disadvantaged-group notifications, grievance mechanisms and subsequent educational initiatives demonstrate a formal commitment to universal and inclusive elementary education. However, formal entitlement and substantive educational access remain distinct. A child may have a legal right to education while still experiencing practical barriers associated with distance, transportation, infrastructure, household economic circumstances, teacher availability or linguistic differences. Earlier NERIE research in Meghalaya provides empirical evidence of several of these challenges, including difficult geographical access, rural-urban disparities, inadequate resources and limitations in inclusive infrastructure. The analysis therefore suggests that tribal inclusion should be understood as a multidimensional educational process. The successful implementation of the RTE Act cannot be measured solely through school enrolment. It must also consider whether children can reach school safely, whether schools possess adequate infrastructure and teachers, whether parents can afford the indirect costs of schooling, whether classroom practices are culturally and linguistically responsive, whether children attend regularly and whether they acquire meaningful learning outcomes.

For Meghalaya, the challenge is consequently not simply to expand educational provision but to deepen the quality and inclusiveness of existing provision. This requires a shift from a narrow understanding of access towards a broader conception of educational opportunity. Such a conception recognises that children must not only be present in school but must also be able to participate, learn and progress within an educational environment that respects their social, cultural and linguistic context. The experiences of West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills are particularly relevant because they demonstrate why district and community-level evidence is necessary alongside state-level statistics. Aggregate educational indicators can conceal substantial variations between communities. Combining administrative data with the experiences of children, parents, teachers and communities therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of the actual implementation of educational rights.

The future of RTE implementation in Meghalaya should consequently be built around three interconnected principles: **access, inclusion and learning**. Access requires schools that are geographically and economically reachable; inclusion requires educational environments responsive to tribal children's linguistic, cultural and social contexts; and learning requires schools to provide meaningful educational outcomes rather than mere attendance. The achievement of these three dimensions would bring the formal promise of the Right to Education closer to its substantive realisation among tribal children in Meghalaya.

References

1. Annual Status of Education Report. (2025). *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2024*. ASER Centre, Pratham Education Foundation.
2. Government of India. (2009). *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. Ministry of Education.
3. Government of Meghalaya. (2011). *The Meghalaya Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Rules, 2011*. Department of Education, Government of Meghalaya.
4. Government of Meghalaya. (2011–2017). *Right to Education notifications and orders*. Department of Education, Government of Meghalaya.
5. Government of Meghalaya. (2018). *Final draft of education policy*. Department of Education, Government of Meghalaya.
6. Government of Meghalaya, Samagra Shiksha. (n.d.). *Access and retention*. Directorate of School Education and Literacy, Government of Meghalaya.
7. Government of Meghalaya, Samagra Shiksha. (n.d.). *Quality education*. Directorate of School Education and Literacy, Government of Meghalaya.
8. Government of Meghalaya, Directorate of Educational Research and Training. (n.d.). *Learning outcomes*. Department of Education, Government of Meghalaya.
9. Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.
10. Ministry of Education. (2024). *UDISE+ 2023–24: Report on unified information system for education plus*. Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India.
11. National Education Policy Drafting Committee. (2019). *Draft National Education Policy 2019*. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.
12. North East Regional Institute of Education. (n.d.). *RTE implementation in lower primary schools of North Eastern States (Assam & Meghalaya): Issues and challenges in terms of quality, access and equity*. National Council of Educational Research and Training.
13. North East Regional Institute of Education. (n.d.). *Implementing interventions at elementary school stage: A block-level research project in Meghalaya*. National Council of Educational Research and Training.
14. Pratham Education Foundation. (2025). *About ASER 2024*. ASER Centre.