Culturally Responsive Teaching and Student Engagement: Strategies, Challenges and Opportunities in the Indian Context

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Abstract: Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an instructional model that exhibits a value on the conscious integration of cultural, linguistic, social backgrounds of learners within classroom practice, which in turn improves engagement, motivation and learning. In India, where plurality of languages in classroom, different social structures, and disparate cultural orientation are the order of the day, CRT provides a very necessary pedagogical tool to gain equity and meaningful learning. The current paper presents an extensive conceptual review of the CRT in the Indian context including the strategies, challenges, and opportunities to enhance student engagement. Using current literature, policy frameworks, and examples of schools in India, the paper outlines the practical strategies that can be used by teachers to bring about smooth integration of cultural knowledge of students into the teaching and learning processes. Participatory, multilingual strategies, and community-related learning are some of the methods cited in the review as essential methods of promoting engagement. Limiting factors like lack of teacher training, prescriptive curriculum, lack of resources and socio cultural barriers are discussed. In addition, the paper explores the opportunities provided by National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India, professional growth, and the use of technology to support CRT implementation. The results highlight the need to integrate the culturally responsive pedagogy in a systematic manner into the teacher training, curriculum development, and policy provisions. The work contributes to the discussion of CRT in India and presents practical suggestions that educators, administrators, and policymakers should accept to foster an inclusive and engaging learning process in different Indian classrooms.

Keywords: Culturally responsive pedagogy, Student engagement, Multilingual education and Inclusive teaching

Introduction: India boasts of one of the most diverse classroom populations in the world. Its students represent a very large diversity of linguistic, cultural, socio-economic backgrounds, including various religions, castes, tribalities and regional practices. Nevertheless, in spite of this vast diversity, the current teaching practices in a lot of Indian classrooms used to be characterized by following standardized, homogeneous approaches that tend to be ignorant of the cultural stories of the students. As a result, learners will be distracted, limiting performance, and continuing disparities in learning results **(Venugopal, 2025)**. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has become a powerful structural framework that attempts to remedy these kinds of inequities around the world. CRT is the pedagogy that acknowledges the students as valuable

resources in their culture, experiences, and views as good assets in the learning process. The strategy does not just recognize the existence of cultural diversity, but it is proactive in integrating cultural backgrounds of students in the process of instruction planning and delivery. The CRT aims at enhancing cognitive, behavioral and emotional involvement in learning activities by integrating the practices in the classroom with the lived reality of learners.

The linguistic plurality of India poses some challenges as well as opportunities to CRT. **Pandey (2026)** confirms the advantages of the multilingual approach and proves that the inclusion of the native languages of students, along with the most common medium of instruction, leads to better understanding, developing the sense of belonging, and active engagement. The code-switching, translanguaging and bilingual instruction are the strategies that can be used in schools with mixed-language cohorts to meet various linguistic needs. Empirical research shows that students are more self-confident and are more motivated when their linguistic background is reflected and incorporated into the teaching processes. One more crucial aspect of CRT in India is the integration of local culture. According to **Biswas (2022),** educators that use indigenous stories, songs, and cultural practices establish deeper relationships between the experiences that students live in the world and the academic program. To illustrate, application of folk stories in the literature classes or the use of motifs of traditional craft in mathematics enhance the relevance and create interest.

These positive results notwithstanding, the amount of Indian CRT literature also indicates a number of gaps. Most of the research is small and limited to specific areas or schools. There are limited longitudinal data that assess the long-term effects of CRT on learning outcomes. In addition, little focus is put on systemic issues, like educating the teacher, curriculum, and available resources that influence CRT implementation. According to **Singh (2022),** educators often have problems with modifying standardized curricula to capture the cultural realities of students thus limiting the potential of CRT. The policy frameworks, including the National Education Policy (NEP)-2020 promote multilingual education and inclusive, learner-centered education. Although the CRT approach to student engagement has grown in popularity in Indian studies, more empirical research and systemic incorporation is needed to realize the full potential of CRT on student engagement.

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Indian Context

The adoption of culturally responsive teaching demands teachers to be proactive in integrating the cultural, linguistic, and social background of the students into the teaching framework. Such strategies can significantly increase student engagement in India where classrooms are characterized by high levels of diversity in terms of language, culture and socioeconomic status. Various strategies have been defined in the literature and supported by real-life examples of India.

   a) **Combining Cultural Knowledge and Local Context:** Incorporation of local cultural stories, folklore, arts, and other forms of traditional knowledge into learning is the way to make learning significant. **Biswas (2022)** records West Bengal schools in which mathematics teachers make use of designs of traditional fabrics to impart geometrical knowledge, and literature teachers use local folktales alongside other texts. This contextualization confirms the cultural background of students and helps to encourage their active participation. Similarly, the rural tribal schools have teachers who include community-based knowledge in science and social studies lessons, including environmental practices, local history, and so on, to make the lesson more relevant and thought-provoking **(Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram, 2026).**

   b) **Multilingual Pedagogy:** Multilingualism in India serves as a special dilemma of teachers. Pandey (2026) states that the understanding and engagement of students increases when they are recognized at home languages in the classroom education. Some of the techniques are code switching, translanguaging, bilingual explanations, and providing reading materials in the native

language of the students. As an example, in tribal schools of Jharkhand, Santali speaking learners are patiently being subjected to Hindi and English, and classroom conversations and other group activities are being further augmented with the mother tongue to enhance comprehension and interest.

c) **Participatory and Collaborative Methods:** Participatory teaching practices (storytelling, peer teaching, role-play, cooperative project) make it possible to allow students to express both personal and cultural points of view. According to **Rahaman (2024),** the students with Class 12 in West Bengal showed greater motivation and engagement rates when they were able to integrate their experiences and cultural knowledge into classroom tasks. These practices are both reinforcers of social involvement and interaction and facilitators of inclusion and affective investment in education.

d) **Correspondence of Curriculum with Cultural Experiences:** National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 focuses on culturally inclusive learner-centered pedagogy. Educators can thus choose examples, case study and examples in communities of students to match the curriculum to lived cultural experiences. The blending of the local histories, the regional art, and local narratives in the lessons in urban schools facilitates cognitive and affective engagement **(Chaudhary & Gopal, 2024).**

e) **Application of Technology and Multimedia Resources:** Digital materials, such as educational applications in local languages, online storytelling platforms, and multimedia presentations, will be used by complimenting culturally responsive strategies. The teachers use videos of performance in the urban and semi-urban schools in India, recordings of folk stories, interactive applications to align cultural knowledge and academic material. These tools are a real benefit in the visual and auditory learner and can be used to reinforce multilingual materials **(Venugopal, 2025).**

Taken together, these strategies increase the cognitive engagement and at the same time the behavioral and emotional aspect(s) of learning, which provides a comprehensive approach to the engagement of students. The proper implementation would require thorough planning, orientation with the curricular objectives, and a keen awareness to socio-cultural forces.

Challenges in Implementing CRT in India

Although the benefits of culturally responsive teaching are beyond dispute, their practical implementation in the Indian educational context is faced with a set of obstacles all of which are systemic, cultural and resource-based in nature, thus limiting the applicability of the CRT programs.

a) **Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development:** The current gap in formal training programs to the Indian educators in culturally responsive methodology is not a secret. According to Kumar and Kant (2025), although teacher members of CRT training exhibit significantly high qualifications in pedagogical practices, these programs are ironically limited in scope and volume. In addition, a lot of teachers still stick to the standard didactic approaches, barely revealing the cultural and linguistic background of students in the learning course. Such teacher preparation shortage, in turn, compromises the CRT fidelity and efficacy.

b) **Standardized Curriculum and Assessment Pressures:** The Indian system of education puts a high value on high stakes standardized tests. Educators are regularly constrained by rigid curricular plans, shorter teaching times, and the necessity to educate the prescribed material fully. Venugopal (2025) notes that these systemic pressures have an extreme constraining effect on the ability of educators to integrate culturally salient materials or even to seek the participatory of learning modalities. The ensuing tension between the adherence to the curriculum and CRT practices

creates a challenge that is difficult to overcome among the educators, who are determined to increase student involvement.

c) **Resource Constraints:** There is also a sharp difference in resource provision especially in rural and tribal schooling. Most of the institutions do not even have basic textbooks; there are no culturally sensitive teaching resources, multimedia and technological infrastructures are rarely available. An example of how the dependency on locally crafted resources (like the education of tribal students in Santali) proves the ingenuity and the acute lack of formal support is the **Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram** in Birbhum (Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram, 2026). This lack of culturally relevant resources limits the teachers in their design of inclusive and engaging lessons.

d) **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Deep-rooted social conventions, such as caste hierarchy and gender inequalities, and the prevalence of certain language groups are also important barriers to successful implementation of CRT. **Singh (2022)** argues that the marginalized students might feel excluded when the dominant cultural practices or language are promoted unconsciously by the teachers or fellow students. To deal with these phenomena, there should be not only increased sensitivity of teachers, but also institutional support, active involvement of the community, and system-wide changes.

e) **Awareness and Policy Translation:** Despite the fact that the National Education Policy 2020 provides a solid framework of culturally inclusive pedagogy, the implementation of this policy into the practical classroom setting is not even. The teachers might have the theoretical knowledge about the concept of CRT but lack the real-life examples, the tangible advice, or the necessary mentorship to implement it consistently. The finding gap between the policy intent and classroom actuality truncates the popularity of CRT.

Opportunities for Enhancing Student Engagement through CRT in India

Although there are certain difficulties that are inevitably related to the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in India, one must admit the copious opportunities that the latter offers in terms of improving student engagement. CRT is inherently aligned to the multifaceted socio-cultural environment of the country, and the intersection of policy, technological development and community resources provide a solid base to aid in effective implementation.

a) **Policy Support:** the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 predicts inclusion, learner-centered pedagogy, multilingualism, and the glorification of local epistemic traditions. The policy itself is a clear support of the idea of integrating the cultural milieus of students into the curriculum development and instructional practice, thus establishing an opportune policy milieu to support the development of CRT. The NEP supports multilingual CRT strategies very well since it encourages schools to develop flexible and culturally responsive modes of instruction that trigger both cognitive and affective involvement **(Chaudhary and Gopal, 2024),** which is why it encourages the use of mother-tongue in early grades, a strategy that has been shown to increase understanding and engagement in tribal and rural classrooms.

b) **Professional Development and Teacher Training:** The extension of professional development efforts which focus on CRT is a key opportunity. Formal workshops, in-service training programs and pre-service modules empower the educators with competencies needed to integrate cultural, linguistic and social aspects into classroom teaching. According to the empirical data provided by **Kumar and Kant (2025),** the engagement practices of teachers who underwent culturally responsive instructional packages are significantly improved, which supports the important role of professional training as one of the key levers of CRT implementation. In addition,

online and blended modules of teacher-education overcome geographic limitations, especially within rural settings, and therefore democratize access to quality professional education.

c)   **Enhanced use of Technology and Digital Resources:** Digital means provide new platforms of culturally responsive pedagogy. Inclusive and engaging teaching is achieved through educational applications, online storytelling applications, and multimedia that are written in local languages. As an example, video-based lessons on folklore and interactive mathematics lessons in Karnataka using Kannada and Tulu make semi-urban schools more academic and ensure that they remain relevant to multiple language groups of students **(Venugopal, 2025).** Moreover, the online platform allows group learning, interaction with peers as well as access to culturally rich archives outside of the physical classroom.

d)   **Community and Cultural Partnerships:** Schools can enhance their levels of engagement by establishing partnerships with neighboring cultural organizations, artists and community elders. These partnerships give the students a chance to learn and enjoy their cultural backgrounds as well as relating them to their learning materials. An example of this kind of model is Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV) in Birbhum, which includes local Santali songs, community storytelling, and environmental knowledge as part of the curriculum, which contributes to strengthening students in terms of their belonging, affirmation of identity, and engagement in behaviors **(Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram, 2026).**

e)   **Curriculum Innovation and Flexibility:** NEP 2020 promotes the idea of flexibility in curriculum that grants the educator the ability to introduce activities to be guided by the cultural experiences of the students. Curriculum adaptation is paradigmatic in urban institutions that incorporate local histories, environmental studies that are linked to local ecosystems, or indigenous arts in their curriculum. The achievement of effective cognitive engagement in the provision of meaningful and salient learning experiences is possible by matching instructional goals with the cultural contexts of students **(Biswas, 2022).**

f)   **Marginalization and Equity:** CRT will provide an effective approach to curtail inequities in Indian classrooms. Through the adoption of different cultural orientations and multilingual access, the marginalized students gain the confidence and motivation that they need to be active participants. Secondary school level data on West Bengal has shown that culturally relevant pedagogy significantly increases the level of engagement with pupils of underrepresented groups **(Rahaman, 2024).**

Discussion and Analysis

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a paradigm shift in the achievement of student engagement in the heterogeneous classes in India. Literary data show that as teachers integrate the cultural milieu, linguistic identities, and community inheritances in educational design, learning adopts a more prominent, encompassing, and effective nature. CRT fosters more thorough involvement and long-term engagement of students, as it addresses the cognitive, affective and behavioral levels at the same time. Practical effectiveness of CRT is supported by empirical case studies done in India. The planned use of tribal languages, local folklore and wisdom in Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV) in West Bengal has proved to increase the level of school attendance, the levels of classroom participation and identity assertion **(Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram, 2026).** Similarly, research based on class-12 groups in urban and peri-urban areas suggests that when a teacher uses culturally sensitive examples, plot devices, and interactive strategies, learners react positively and demonstrate an increased sense of engagement and concerted proficiency **(Rahaman, 2024).** These statistics highlight the effectiveness of CRT in the entire range of Indian

educational settings: urban, rural and tribal, as long as implementation is done with intelligent modification. However, the structural barriers should be overcome. The readiness of teachers is also a topical barrier since most of them are not professionally trained in the CRT techniques **(Kumar and Kant, 2025).** Adherence to standardized curricula and test requirements also limit the ability of pedagogical flexibility and limit the incorporation of culturally responsive models. Additionally, deep-rooted socio-cultural hierarchies, caste principles, and gender inequalities might interfere with the achievement of equitable classroom engagement, and CRT will only reach as far.

The comparative analysis of Indian CRT practice against the global models shows that it has some unique adaptations. Although in the international models, the target group of minority cohorts is mostly urban, in Indian classrooms, it is important to pay attention to multilingualism, rural and tribal reality, and socio-economic heterogeneity. Indian CRT approaches, thus, often involve mother-tongue teaching, integration of local knowledge and working with the local communities, which in the Western world would not hold prevalent roles but are essential to cultural relevance and inclusion in India. In pedagogical perspective, CRT holds that engagement is not a set of instructional design only, but includes the relations that define the climate in the classroom. When teachers recognize and legitimize the cultural differences of students, they create learning communities where the students will feel appreciated and eager to learn. These types of climates enable equity, reduce alienation and enable historically disadvantaged groups to be uplifted in academics. CRT is not to be viewed as a prescriptive list of methods but rather a flexible context-based framework, which needs to be responsive to diverse realities of the Indian educational situation.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is one of the major pedagogical concepts that aim to improve the engagement rate of students and the inclusion of learning in India. CRT facilitates valuable and fair learning in diverse classrooms by recognizing and acknowledging the cultural, linguistic and social diversity of learners. Several studies using Indian case studies show that CRT strategies such as mother-tongue instruction, participation-based learning, local knowledge integration and community-based engagement has a positive impact on cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement in students. CRT is facing tremendous challenges despite its potential. Its implementation can be hindered by teacher preparedness, lack of professional development, inflexible curricula and social cultural injustice (Kumar and Kant, 2025; Singh, 2022). The problem of resource shortage in rural and tribal schools also limits the access to culturally relevant teaching resources and technology. These challenges support the fact that systematic support is necessary to make sure that CRT does not remain on the examples but can be extended to Indian classrooms. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India is an enabling policy, which suggests an inclusive, learner-centered teaching method and multilingualism. However Culturally responsive teaching is an innovative approach to pedagogy in Indian situation, but through engagement, diversity appreciation and equity; CRT will be able to develop classrooms that encourage all students to participate, regardless of their linguistic, cultural and sociology-economic backgrounds and become involved in learning, gaining confidence and succeeding academically. The future researches ought to evaluate the longitudinal effects, explore various situations in different regions and test scalable models of CRT implementation to enhance evidence-based practices to achieve inclusive education in India.

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