

Acculturation Experiences of Non-Tribal Teachers and Their Influence on the Academic Performance of Scheduled Tribe Students in Car Nicobar, Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Dr. Bency Joy

Faculty, State Institute of Education, A & N Islands (ORCID ID: 0009-0000-6320-3444)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the acculturation experiences of non-tribal (non-ST) teachers posted in the tribal-dominant district of Car Nicobar, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and examines how these experiences influence the academic performance of Scheduled Tribe (ST) students. The study was prompted by the PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 findings, which reported persistent underperformance among ST students across the Foundational, Preparatory, and Middle stages. Guided by Berry's (1997, 2005) Acculturation Model, the study adopted a qualitative case-study design (Creswell, 2013) involving semi-structured interviews with fourteen non-ST teachers (NST01–NST14). Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, while trustworthiness was ensured through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis generated four global themes: **Language and Cultural Alignment**, **Contextualised Pedagogy and Instructional Adaptation**, **Structural and Institutional Constraints**, and **Community Engagement and Home–School Ecology**. Findings indicate that teachers who adopted an integration orientation by incorporating Nicobarese language, culture, and locally relevant pedagogical practices fostered greater student engagement, participation, and foundational learning. These findings support culturally responsive teaching frameworks (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and relational approaches to Indigenous education (Bishop et al., 2019). In contrast, teachers reflecting separation or marginalisation orientations experienced communication barriers, weaker teacher–student relationships, and greater reliance on rote instructional practices. The study concludes that teacher acculturation is both a psychological and an institutional process that significantly influences educational quality and equity in tribal contexts. It recommends institutionalising pre-deployment cultural orientation, structured mentoring, culturally responsive professional development, and sustained school–community partnerships to strengthen teacher adaptation and improve learning outcomes for ST students in culturally diverse island settings.

Keywords: Acculturation, teacher adaptation, tribal education, Berry's model, culturally responsive pedagogy, Car Nicobar, PARAKH/NAS 2024

Education in India's tribal regions continues to face persistent challenges despite wide-ranging policy reform under the National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). Among these challenges, the academic performance gap between Scheduled Tribe (ST) students and their non-tribal peers remains one of the most stubborn. The PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024, India's national achievement survey, found that Scheduled Tribe (ST) students in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands scored below national averages at every stage assessed. At Grade 3, the gap was fourteen percentage points in both Language and Mathematics; at Grade 6, eight percentage points in Language and Mathematics and six points in The World Around Us; and at Grade 9, between two and ten percentage points across Language, Mathematics, Science, and Social Science (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2025).

Car Nicobar, the administrative and educational centre of the Nicobar district, is one such context. Its government schools are staffed predominantly by non-tribal teachers recruited from mainland India or from elsewhere within the Islands. These teachers typically arrive with sound subject knowledge and professional

qualifications, but their day-to-day effectiveness depends heavily on something the curriculum rarely names directly: their ability to adapt to an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environment.

This process of adaptation, known as *acculturation*, refers to the psychological and behavioural changes that occur when individuals come into sustained contact with a new cultural environment (Berry, 1997). For teachers working in culturally distinct settings, acculturation is a gradual and continuous process through which they learn to understand unfamiliar norms, values, communication patterns, and community expectations. It involves not only adjustments in everyday behaviour but also the development of attitudes and practices that enable meaningful engagement with learners and their communities. In schools, acculturation becomes evident in numerous everyday interactions. It is reflected in how teachers greet and address children, the examples and illustrations they use while planning lessons, the meanings they attribute to students' silence or participation, the ways they communicate with parents, and the extent to which they engage with village life and community events. Through these routine encounters, teachers gradually develop culturally responsive practices and relationships of trust that support effective teaching and learning. Such responsiveness enables teachers to connect classroom experiences with students' cultural backgrounds and lived realities, thereby fostering more inclusive and meaningful educational environments (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Berry's acculturation model describes four broad acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997). Integration describes individuals who maintain meaningful aspects of their own culture while also adopting elements of the host culture. Assimilation describes those who set aside their original cultural identity in order to fully absorb the host culture. Separation describes individuals who hold firmly to their own culture while avoiding sustained contact with the new one. Marginalisation describes those who lose connection with both their culture of origin and the host culture, typically the most psychologically costly of the four positions (Berry, 2005). Although Berry developed this typology to explain the experience of migrants, sojourners, and refugees, its logic travels well to teachers who are posted, sometimes for a single academic cycle and sometimes for a decade, into a cultural world markedly different from their own.

Car Nicobar adds further texture to this picture. The island's population is predominantly Nicobarese, sustained by a strong oral tradition, community-based living, and close associations with the church and local leadership structures (Author's field notes, 2025). Nicobarese dialect remains the primary medium of everyday communication, while English and Hindi function largely as second languages acquired through formal schooling (Author's field notes, 2025). For teachers arriving from the mainland, this means that the ordinary instruments of classroom interaction and management, such as an instruction, a joke, or a reprimand, may not always be interpreted as intended (Author's field notes, 2025). At the same time, these teachers bring valuable pedagogical resources, including familiarity with national curricular standards, experience with formal assessment practices, and, for many, a genuine and growing commitment to the communities they serve.

National frameworks such as the NIPUN Bharat Mission for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 (NCERT, 2023), call for contextualised, inclusive teaching, yet they tend to assume a degree of cultural common ground between teacher and learner that simply does not hold in a setting like Car Nicobar. In contexts of genuine cultural distance, it is teachers' adaptation rather than curriculum fidelity alone, that appears to determine whether foundational learning takes hold. International research on Indigenous and minority education reinforces this point: culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogies have been associated with higher levels of trust, motivation, and student engagement by drawing on learners' cultural knowledge and experiences (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Similarly, relational and culturally grounded approaches to curriculum design have been linked to improved engagement among Indigenous learners and, in some contexts, among non-Indigenous students as well (Bishop et al., 2019). What remains comparatively unexamined is how this adaptation unfolds for teachers working in India's island territories, where geographic isolation compounds the usual difficulties of cross-cultural teaching.

This study, therefore, investigates the acculturation experiences of non-ST teachers in Car Nicobar and their relationship to ST students' academic performance. It asks, specifically, how teachers navigate cultural and linguistic differences, what coping and adaptation strategies they adopt, and how these strategies relate to student motivation, participation, and achievement. The inquiry is anchored in Berry's Acculturation Model, which offers a theoretical lens for treating teachers' experiences as multidimensional processes of identity negotiation,

social interaction, and institutional mediation, rather than as a simple matter of training or willpower. In doing so, the study extends the discourse on cultural competence in Indian education beyond its usual focus on student adjustment, toward the comparatively neglected question of teacher adjustment.

The investigation carries considerable practical and theoretical significance. It speaks directly to the need for culturally responsive induction programmes, bilingual instructional resources, and sustained school–community partnerships as essential conditions for teacher effectiveness in tribal settings. Drawing on principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, the study underscores the importance of connecting classroom practices with students' linguistic and cultural experiences. It also extends Berry's framework into the educational domain by conceptualising acculturation not simply as an individual psychological adjustment, but as a dual and reciprocal process of adaptation between teachers and the communities in which they work. From this perspective, effective teaching emerges through mutual learning, trust, and cultural negotiation rather than one-sided assimilation. By situating the educational experiences of Scheduled Tribe students in Car Nicobar within this broader ecosystem of teacher adaptation, the study highlights the role of integration-oriented teachers as cultural mediators who bridge home and school cultures. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to realise the inclusive and equitable aspirations embodied in NEP 2020 and Sustainable Development Goal

Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Foundation: Berry's Acculturation Model

Berry (1997, 2005) proposed that individuals adapting to a new cultural environment can be located along two underlying dimensions: the degree to which they maintain their original or heritage culture, and the degree to which they take up the host or new culture. The interaction of these two dimensions yields four characteristic strategies, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Berry's Acculturation Strategies and Likely Classroom Behaviour

Strategy	Description	Likely Behaviour in the Classroom
Integration	Balancing one's own culture with adaptation to the new culture	Builds mutual respect; fosters inclusive, culturally responsive teaching practices
Assimilation	Setting aside one's original culture to fully adopt the new culture	Seeks rapport through conformity but may lose authenticity, empathy, or instructional depth
Separation	Holding firmly to one's own culture while avoiding the new one	Creates cultural and communicative distance; favours rule-bound, textbook-driven instruction
Marginalisation	Losing meaningful connection with both the original and host cultures	Leads to disengagement, professional isolation, and a diminished sense of belonging

In the context of this research, non-ST teachers assigned to tribal-dominant Car Nicobar display varying degrees of these four strategies, and the strategy a teacher gravitates toward shapes how they connect with tribal learners, manage classroom participation, and ultimately influence learning outcomes. An integrated teacher might blend mainland pedagogical techniques with Nicobarese examples and vocabulary; a separated teacher might insist on textbook-paced instruction regardless of whether the class has understood the previous step. Berry (2005) further distinguishes psychological adaptation, emotional well-being and a stable sense of identity from sociocultural adaptation — the practical, behavioural competence to function effectively in the new setting (a distinction elaborated by Ward & Kennedy, 2001). For teachers, the first shows up as confidence and belonging; the second shows up as the ability to read a classroom, manage a lesson, and respond appropriately to local norms. The present study treats both dimensions as relevant to understanding why some non-ST teachers thrive in Car Nicobar's schools while others struggle.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Acculturation: Concept and Theoretical Foundations

Acculturation theory offers a framework for understanding how individuals change — psychologically, socioculturally, and at times economically — when they move between cultural contexts. Berry (1997) conceptualised acculturation as a bidimensional process built on two separable preferences: maintaining one's heritage culture and engaging the host or dominant culture. Crossing these dimensions yields the now-familiar fourfold typology of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation, with integration consistently associated with lower acculturative stress and better psychological and sociocultural adjustment, and marginalisation associated with the poorest outcomes (Berry, 2005). Critically, Berry's later work reframes acculturation as a two-way process in which everyone in a plural society is, in some sense, involved (Berry, 2005), implying that the dominant group here, the school system and the wider non-tribal teaching workforce, is also changing, not merely the newcomer. Outcomes depend heavily on mutual accommodation and on whether institutions, including schools, adopt genuinely pluralistic rather than assimilationist postures (Berry, 1997, 2005). Ward and Kennedy (2001) sharpened this picture by separating psychological adaptation (emotional well-being, identity stability) from sociocultural adaptation (behavioural competence, the capacity to function effectively in the new setting) a distinction this study found indispensable for separating teachers' inner emotional journeys from their outward instructional competence.

Teacher Acculturation, Cultural Competence, and Responsive Pedagogy

While Berry's model provides a broad framework for understanding intercultural adaptation, a substantial body of educational scholarship narrows this focus to the role of teachers in culturally diverse classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching is conceptualized as a pedagogical approach that draws upon students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles as educational assets rather than deficits (Gay, 2018). This perspective highlights the importance of aligning classroom practices with students' cultural backgrounds and emphasizes that differences in communication styles can significantly influence learning. For instance, Gay (2018) identifies a recurring mismatch between the European-American "topic-centred" communication patterns often preferred by teachers and the "topic-associative" discourse patterns commonly found among many minority and Indigenous communities. Such a mismatch is particularly relevant in contexts such as Car Nicobar, where oral storytelling traditions and indigenous modes of communication (Author's field notes, 2025) continue to shape children's learning experiences.

Similarly, the foundational work on culturally relevant pedagogy proposed that effective teaching in culturally diverse settings is grounded in three interconnected commitments: promoting academic success, fostering cultural competence, and developing students' critical or sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The study, based on eight exemplary teachers working with African American students, demonstrated that these educators successfully integrated students' cultural identities into classroom practice while maintaining high academic expectations. Notably, the teachers examined in the study shared their students' cultural backgrounds. This raises an important question for culturally distinct contexts such as Car Nicobar: to what extent can culturally relevant pedagogy be effectively enacted by teachers who do not belong to the cultural community they serve, and what adaptations may be necessary to bridge this cultural distance (Ladson-Billings, 1995)?

Empirical research on teacher preparation further underscores the practical significance of this challenge. A recent mixed-methods study involving pre-service teachers in Cyprus demonstrated that structured training in culturally responsive teaching significantly enhanced participants perceived preparedness, with mean scores increasing from 2.8 to 3.7, representing a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.25$) (Ghaeimi & Boroushka, 2025). The study also identified cultural awareness, inclusive communication, and adaptability as the three competencies that most strongly predicted effective student engagement, highlighting the critical role of targeted teacher preparation in culturally diverse educational settings (Ghaeimi & Boroushka, 2025). The same study identified language barriers, reported by sixty percent of participants, as the single most significant obstacle to implementation, and found that school-based support systems were largely inadequate, leaving individual teachers to manage cultural adaptation largely on their own. While the Cypriot setting differs sharply from an

Indigenous Indian island context, the pattern — language as the primary friction point, institutional support as thin, and individual disposition as the variable left to do most of the work —anticipates much of what the Car Nicobar data reveal.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy is inseparable from the process of teacher acculturation. Rather than viewing acculturation as a one-way adjustment on the part of teachers, contemporary interpretations emphasise it as a dual and reciprocal process in which both teachers and communities negotiate meanings, expectations, and relationships. In such contexts, cultural competence emerges not from assimilation but from sustained interaction, mutual trust, and shared learning. Responsive pedagogy thus becomes an expression of reciprocal adaptation, enabling teachers to draw upon students' cultural experiences while simultaneously refining their own beliefs and practices to create more inclusive and meaningful learning environments (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Berry, 1997).

Language, Translanguaging, and the Politics of Instructional Medium

Language occupies a central position in nearly every account of teacher–student cultural distance examined in this study. The concept of translanguaging reconceptualizes the language practices of multilingual learners by viewing their home and school languages not as separate or competing systems but as components of a single, integrated linguistic repertoire that can be flexibly mobilized to support comprehension, identity formation, and academic learning (García & Li Wei, 2014). Within this framework, teachers who intentionally scaffold instruction through students' home languages, rather than suppressing them, create opportunities for enhanced metacognitive development, deeper knowledge construction, and stronger identity affirmation (García & Li Wei, 2014). In the context of Car Nicobar, this perspective suggests that non-tribal teachers who incorporate Nicobarese vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and oral traditions into English or Hindi instruction are not diluting the curriculum; rather, they are employing an evidence-based pedagogical strategy that acknowledges and builds upon students' existing linguistic and cultural resources.

In contrast, ethnographic research on Adivasi education in Kerala illustrates the consequences of excluding indigenous languages from classroom practice. The imposition of a dominant state language on tribal children who speak one of India's more than 450 undocumented tribal dialects has been described as a subtle yet pervasive form of marginalization that devalues indigenous knowledge by reducing it to an “unclean folk way” (Manojan, 2019). Although this research was conducted among mainland Adivasi communities rather than the Nicobarese population, the underlying process it identifies is highly relevant to the present study. Specifically, it demonstrates how language can function as a primary mechanism of cultural marginalization through routine classroom practices, making it an important lens for understanding teacher–student interactions in culturally distinct island contexts such as Car Nicobar (Manojan, 2019).

Decolonising and Relational Models from Indigenous Education

Beyond the Indian context, one of the most instructive parallels for the present study emerges from a multi-year collaborative action research project conducted in Australia. This study followed fifteen teachers and eight Aboriginal community members across a cluster of schools over a three-year period as they worked collaboratively to embed local Aboriginal perspectives into everyday classroom practice (Bishop et al., 2019). The findings revealed a clear developmental trajectory in teachers' professional learning. Initially, many teachers experienced uncertainty, fear of causing offence, limited confidence, and a tendency to rely on tokenistic approaches to Indigenous inclusion. Over time, however, meaningful change occurred only when teachers invested in sustained relationships with Aboriginal community members, setting aside traditional notions of professional authority and engaging community knowledge holders as equal partners rather than occasional guest contributors (Bishop et al., 2019).

By the conclusion of the project, four of the five participating schools had established paid or voluntary roles for Aboriginal community members, and both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students demonstrated measurable improvements in engagement and curiosity toward Indigenous perspectives (Bishop et al., 2019). This progression from tokenistic inclusion, through professional discomfort, to sustained community partnership, provides a compelling conceptual parallel to the experiences described by several teachers in Car Nicobar,

although within a more compressed timeframe. The Australian experience therefore offers valuable insights into how authentic collaboration with Indigenous communities can transform culturally responsive teaching practices in contexts where teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds (Bishop et al., 2019).

Tribal Education in India and the Andaman and Nicobar Context

Tribal education in India has long been shaped by tensions between mainstream schooling and Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and community life. A review of tribal education in India suggests that the failure of schools to recognise learners' linguistic, cultural, and social identities can contribute to alienation, reduced participation, and weaker educational outcomes (Jabbar et al., 2024). These concerns are particularly relevant in the Car Nicobar Educational Zone, where many teachers are posted from other parts of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago or from outside the tribal community. Consequently, they are required to adapt to cultural environments, community norms, and educational expectations that may differ considerably from their previous personal and professional experiences. While implementing national educational reforms such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and NIPUN Bharat Mission, these teachers must simultaneously negotiate local cultural realities, making cultural adaptation and context-sensitive pedagogy important dimensions of effective teaching practice in tribal settings. These challenges are not unique to the Nicobar Islands. A broader review of tribal education in India similarly identifies teachers' limited familiarity with local languages, cultural practices, and community norms as a recurring barrier to effective educational engagement. The review further notes that curricula often fail to reflect the lived realities and experiences of tribal learners, creating an additional disconnect between schooling and students' everyday lives (Jabbar et al., 2024). The PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 UT Report for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands situates this national pattern locally: ST students lagged behind national averages at every grade level surveyed, with the gap most severe in Language at the Foundational stage, and with only a minority of teachers reporting access to professional development, ICT training, or structured mentoring (NCERT, 2025). A locally grounded study examining the acculturation experiences of second- and third-generation migrant youth across the Andaman and Nicobar Islands found that assimilation emerged as the dominant acculturation pattern among the migrant communities studied. While the study focused on migrants rather than tribal populations, it provides a useful local perspective for interpreting the relationship between acculturation, educational aspirations, and social mobility in the islands (Joy & Gopal, 2018).

Methodological Literature Informing the Present Design

The design and analysis of this study draw on an established qualitative tradition. The case study approach is particularly well suited to the in-depth examination of a bounded system through the use of multiple data sources and purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). In the present study, the bounded system comprised non-tribal teachers working within Nicobarese school communities. Data were analysed using the six-phase model of thematic analysis, consisting of familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, naming, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This framework provided the analytic backbone for moving from raw interview transcripts to the study's four global themes. Trustworthiness was guided by the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To operationalise these criteria throughout the research process, a phase-by-phase approach to ensuring rigor in thematic analysis was adopted (Nowell et al., 2017), including the use of audit trails and member-checking procedures.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature converges on three points.

First, integration-oriented acculturation is consistently linked to better psychological and instructional outcomes than assimilation, separation, or marginalisation, across settings as different as immigrant resettlement, Indigenous Australian schooling, and pre-service teacher training in the Mediterranean.

Second, language is the single most frequently cited mechanism through which cultural distance is felt in the classroom, whether framed as a barrier to be overcome (Ghaeimi & Boroushka, 2025; Jabbar et al., 2024) or a resource to be mobilised through translanguaging (García & Li Wei, 2014).

Third, almost none of this literature examines teacher acculturation directly in India's island tribal contexts: studies of Indian tribal education tend to rely on mainland, often Adivasi, settings (Jabbar et al., 2024; Manojan, 2019), while the one locally grounded Andaman and Nicobar study available (Joy & Gopal, 2018) deliberately excludes tribal populations, and the PARAKH 2024 survey, however authoritative on outcomes, is silent on the mechanisms producing them.

The present study addresses this gap directly, combining Berry's conceptual model with rich qualitative evidence from non-ST teachers themselves to connect classroom-level acculturation processes with the achievement patterns that PARAKH 2024 documents only in aggregate.

Statement of the Problem

The PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 data make the scale of the problem in Car Nicobar difficult to ignore, but they cannot, by their quantitative design, explain why ST students underperform or how teacher behaviour contributes to that gap. This study addresses that explanatory gap by treating non-ST teachers' acculturation experiences as a central, under-examined variable in ST students' academic outcomes.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the nature and dimensions of acculturation experiences among non-ST teachers in the tribal-dominant district of Car Nicobar.
- 2) To identify the challenges and coping strategies employed by teachers in adapting to the Nicobarese socio-cultural and educational environment.
- 3) To explore the relationship between teachers' cultural adaptation and ST students' engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes.
- 4) To analyse how teachers' acculturation orientations relate to the academic performance patterns documented in PARAKH 2024.
- 5) To propose context-sensitive professional strategies for improving teacher-student cultural alignment and learning achievement among ST students.

Research Questions

1. What are the acculturation experiences of non-ST teachers working in tribal-dominant schools of Car Nicobar?
2. What challenges do these teachers face in adapting to the local culture, language, and educational practices?
3. How do non-ST teachers perceive their relationships with ST students in terms of understanding, trust, and communication?
4. In what ways do teachers' acculturation experiences influence their teaching practices and student engagement?
5. How might these factors help explain the achievement patterns documented in PARAKH 2024?
6. What interventions or institutional support systems could help non-ST teachers achieve greater cultural competence and improve ST students' learning outcomes?

METHOD

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences of non-ST teachers working in the tribal schools of Car Nicobar. A qualitative case study is particularly appropriate for generating

an in-depth understanding of a bounded and contextually embedded phenomenon, enabling researchers to examine complex processes within their real-life settings rather than merely identifying relationships between variables (Creswell, 2013). In the context of this study, the case study approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of teacher acculturation as it unfolded within the distinctive sociocultural environment of Car Nicobar.

Participants

Fourteen non-ST teachers (coded NST01–NST14) participated in the study. The participants were drawn from government schools serving the Foundational, Preparatory, and Middle stages of education in Car Nicobar. The sample included teachers of both genders with teaching experience ranging from two to twelve years. None of the participants identified as members of a Scheduled Tribe, and the majority were originally from mainland India. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants along with the predominant acculturation orientation that emerged for each teacher based on the interview and classroom observation data. These orientations should be interpreted as descriptive representations of each teacher’s overall pattern of engagement rather than as fixed or static characteristics, as several participants demonstrated noticeable shifts in their acculturation strategies over time.

Table 2. Participant Profile

Code	Gender	Experience (yrs)	Stage Taught	Predominant Orientation
NST01	Male	5	Middle	Separation
NST02	Female	3	Foundational	Separation moving toward Integration
NST03	Female	7	Preparatory	Integration
NST04	Male	4	Foundational	Integration (after initial acculturative stress)
NST05	Female	6	Middle	Assimilation
NST06	Male	8	Preparatory	Integration
NST07	Female	10	Middle	Integration (mentor role)
NST08	Male	2	Foundational	Separation
NST09	Female	9	Preparatory	Integration
NST10	Male	5	Foundational	Integration
NST11	Female	6	Middle	Integration
NST12	Male	12	Preparatory	Assimilation
NST13	Female	3	Foundational	Marginalisation
NST14	Male	7	Middle	Integration

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over a week, each lasting forty-five to sixty minutes and exploring language adaptation, instructional practice, community engagement, and perceptions of student performance. Interviews were supplemented by field observation notes and a review of school-level PARAKH 2024 results, allowing triangulation across teacher self-report, classroom observation, and outcome data (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through an iterative process of coding and theme development, the analysis generated four global themes: Language and Cultural Alignment; Contextualised Pedagogy and Instructional Adaptation; Structural and Institutional Constraints; and Community Engagement and Home–School Ecology. Teacher identities were anonymised using participant codes (NST01–NST14) throughout the study.

Trustworthiness

The credibility of the study was strengthened through multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness. Data triangulation was achieved by integrating evidence from interviews, classroom observations, and student outcome data. Member checking was conducted by sharing thematic summaries with participants to validate the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretations. These procedures were guided by the trustworthiness framework proposed for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and were implemented through the systematic thematic analysis procedures outlined by Nowell et al. (2017).

Ethical Considerations

Participants gave informed consent, and teacher codes replaced personal identifiers throughout data handling and reporting. Cultural sensitivity was maintained throughout by consulting local teachers and following community protocols for engagement with Nicobarese stakeholders.

Limitations of the Methodology

As a single-district case study, the findings reported here are not intended to generalise to all tribal contexts; their value lies instead in the depth of insight they offer into one under-studied site, and in the transferable conceptual patterns they suggest for similarly remote, culturally distinct teaching contexts elsewhere.

RESULTS: THEMATIC FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the fourteen teacher interviews generated four global themes, summarised in Table 3 together with their constituent organising themes. Verbatim extracts are presented under each organising theme to illustrate the range of teacher experience; teacher codes (NST01–NST14) are retained throughout to preserve traceability across themes while protecting participant anonymity.

Table 3. Thematic Map

Global Theme	Organising Themes (illustrative)
Language and Cultural Alignment	Linguistic distance and the burden of translation; translanguaging and symbolic validation; emotional and identity costs of linguistic isolation
Contextualised Pedagogy and Instructional Adaptation	Localising curriculum content; flexible instruction versus textbook rigidity; storytelling, music, and experiential learning
Structural and Institutional Constraints	Absence of cultural induction and orientation; mentoring and peer networks; postings, transfers, and institutional neglect
Community Engagement and Home–School Ecology	Building trust through community and church participation; reading cultural norms of silence and collective response; sustained relational investment versus transience

Global Theme 1: Language and Cultural Alignment

Across nearly every interview, language emerged as the first and most immediate site of cultural contact — and, for many teachers, the first and most persistent source of friction.

Linguistic distance and the burden of translation.

For teachers newly posted to Car Nicobar, the simple mechanics of instruction were often the earliest casualty of linguistic distance.

NST02 recalled, *“In the first few months, I needed a student to translate even simple instructions like ‘open your books.’ It was humbling, and it was also impossible to plan a fast-moving lesson when so much time goes into just being understood.”*

NST08 located the same difficulty at the centre of a broader sense of estrangement: *“Communication barriers were the biggest wall for me. I speak Hindi and English, but the children switch to Nicobarese the moment they are unsure, so I lose them in that gap.”*

Translanguaging and symbolic validation.

Where some teachers experienced linguistic distance as an obstacle, others treated it as an opening.

NST03 described introducing Nicobarese words alongside English vocabulary as something that *“helped students feel that their culture mattered in the classroom.”*

NST11 went further, describing a turning point: *“When I learned just ten Nicobarese words for greetings and counting, the classroom changed overnight. Children who never raised their hands began answering in their own language first, and then in English.”*

NST06 framed this as an ongoing, modest practice rather than a single breakthrough: *“I keep a small notebook of words I pick up from students every week. It’s not real fluency, but it tells them I am trying to meet them halfway.”*

Emotional and identity costs of linguistic isolation.

For several teachers, the language gap was experienced less as a technical problem than as a personal one.

NST05, who had tried to close the gap by imitating local speech patterns, described an unexpected cost: *“I tried to fit in completely, even imitating the way they spoke, but after a while, I felt like I was losing my own self.”*

NST04 located a similar strain earlier in the posting, describing months of homesickness and what they called *“emotional fatigue,”* which eased only *“after building community ties.”*

For NST13, the isolation never fully resolved: *“I do my duty, but I don’t really belong here.”*

Global Theme 2: Contextualised Pedagogy and Instructional Adaptation

A second cluster of themes concerned what teachers actually did with their lesson content and classroom routines once the language gap was, however imperfectly, bridged.

Localising curriculum content.

Several teachers described deliberately reworking textbook material to reflect island life.

NST09 explained, *“I replaced the apple-and-orange word problems with coconuts and fish catch counts. Suddenly, the same children who stared blankly at the textbook were solving sums faster than I expected.”*

NST03's earlier-cited use of Nicobarese vocabulary functioned in much the same register, treating local content not as a departure from the syllabus but as a route into it.

Flexible instruction versus textbook rigidity.

Other teachers held more tightly to prescribed pacing.

NST01 explained a preference for procedural fidelity: *"I follow the textbook as it is; the syllabus has a timeline and I cannot improvise every day."*

NST14 offered a contrasting account of what that rigidity costs: *"Some of my colleagues finish the chapter and move on, but with these children, if you don't slow down and repeat in two or three ways, they simply switch off."*

Storytelling, music, and experiential learning.

A third group of teachers built instruction around oral and experiential forms with deep roots in Nicobarese life. Extending the practice already described above, NST11 reported that incorporating local songs alongside vocabulary noticeably increased curiosity and willingness to respond.

NST10 described a comparable approach built around narrative: *"Storytelling worked better than worksheets. I would ask them to narrate a fishing trip in their own words, and then we built the English sentence together from what they said."*

Global Theme 3: Structural and Institutional Constraints

Acculturation did not occur in a vacuum; teachers repeatedly located both its difficulties and its breakthroughs in the institutional conditions surrounding their posting.

Absence of cultural induction and orientation.

Many participants described arriving with no formal preparation for the cultural and linguistic realities awaiting them.

NST08 summarised a common experience: *"No one told us anything about the culture before we were posted. We learn on the job, through mistakes."*

NST02 described an almost identical entry into the role, learning the basics of classroom-level cultural navigation only through early, often uncomfortable, missteps.

Mentoring and peer networks.

Where senior colleagues stepped in, teachers described a markedly different trajectory. NST07, who had become something of an informal mentor to newer staff, observed, *"Having a senior teacher who understood both cultures made all the difference."*

NST06 credited a senior colleague directly for breaking a period of isolation: *"My first six months were lonely, until a senior teacher started taking me along to the church functions. After that, parents started recognising me, and that changed everything in class."*

Postings, transfers, and institutional neglect.

A third concern centred on the churn created by short postings and frequent transfers.

NST13's sense of not belonging, discussed above, was compounded by a broader institutional pattern that NST12 described in terms of its cost to students: *"Every two years, a new teacher comes, and the children have to start trusting someone all over again. How can learning be stable when teachers are not?"*

Global Theme 4: Community Engagement and Home–School Ecology

The final global theme concerned the relationship between the school and the wider community — church, village, and family within which it sits.

Building trust through community and church participation.

Several teachers identified community participation, rather than classroom technique, as the real turning point in their acculturation. Extending an account introduced earlier, NST06's relationship with parents shifted only after attending church functions alongside a mentor.

NST14 described a closely related experience: *"Once I started attending the village feast, parents began stopping me to talk about their children. Before that, they would just nod and walk away."*

NST04's recovery from early *"emotional fatigue,"* noted above, followed the same pattern of deliberate community investment.

Reading cultural norms of silence, respect, and collective response.

A recurring sub-theme concerned the risk of misreading Nicobarese classroom behaviour through a mainland lens.

NST01, whose overall orientation tended toward separation, nonetheless described a genuine shift in interpretation over time: *"I used to think their silence meant they didn't know the answer. Later I realised many were waiting for the group to agree before one child spoke for all of them."*

NST09 reported a similar realisation, noting that what initially read as disengagement was often a culturally specific form of collective deliberation rather than individual hesitation.

Sustained relational investment versus transience.

Teachers with the longest tenure tended to describe acculturation as a multi-year project rather than a single adjustment. NST12, already quoted on the cost of frequent transfers, framed their own long posting as the condition that had allowed any trust to form at all, while NST05's earlier account of identity strain under an assimilation strategy suggested that durable relational investment, without an accompanying sense of personal authenticity, can come at a real psychological cost even when it does eventually produce classroom rapport.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of teacher acculturation in shaping classroom processes and influencing student learning outcomes within the culturally distinct context of Car Nicobar. Interpreted through Berry's acculturation framework, the experiences of the fourteen participating teachers demonstrate that acculturation exists along a continuum encompassing integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation (Berry, 1997, 2005). The findings further reveal that teachers' acculturation orientations are not static or predetermined; rather, they evolve in response to multiple interacting factors, including proficiency in the local language, the availability of institutional support, the degree of social acceptance within the community, and individual attitudes and dispositions. By situating teacher acculturation within the broader educational context, this study extends Berry's theoretical framework beyond its traditional focus on individual psychological adaptation to conceptualise acculturation as a pedagogical and institutional process with significant implications for educational equity, culturally responsive teaching, and inclusive schooling in tribal contexts (Berry, 1997, 2005).

Integration as a Constructive Pathway

Teachers who demonstrated an integration orientation—namely NST03, NST06, NST09, NST10, NST11, and NST14—consistently reported adapting their instructional practices by incorporating local vocabulary, culturally relevant examples, and oral traditions into classroom teaching. These adaptations were associated with noticeable improvements in students' engagement, participation, and comprehension. This finding is consistent with the principles of culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy, which advocate drawing upon learners' cultural knowledge and experiences to enhance educational outcomes (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It also resonates with the translinguaging framework, wherein students' home languages are recognised as valuable pedagogical resources rather than barriers to learning (García & Li Wei, 2014). Furthermore, the findings mirror those reported by Bishop et al. (2019) in the context of Australian Aboriginal education, where meaningful and sustained relationships with local communities, rather than formal professional development alone, enabled teachers to progress from superficial cultural acknowledgment to authentic and transformative classroom practice.

The Strain of Assimilation

A smaller group of teachers, NST05 and NST12—exhibited an acculturation orientation more closely aligned with assimilation. These teachers reported adopting local linguistic practices and cultural norms while simultaneously suppressing aspects of their own cultural identities to facilitate acceptance within the community. Although this approach appeared to foster initial social acceptance, NST05's account revealed that it was accompanied by a perceived loss of personal identity. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that unidirectional adaptation, when pursued without reciprocal cultural integration, may result in psychological stress despite yielding short-term sociocultural benefits (Ward & Kennedy, 2001). From a pedagogical perspective, these teachers appeared to place greater emphasis on establishing interpersonal rapport than on developing culturally responsive instructional practices. The findings therefore suggest that assimilation, in the absence of critical reflection and reciprocal cultural engagement, is unlikely to constitute a sustainable or effective long-term approach to teaching in culturally diverse settings.

Separation, Marginalisation, and Disengagement

Teachers whose experiences reflected orientations of separation or marginalization, specifically NST01, NST08, and particularly NST13—reported limited cultural alignment with the local community and correspondingly lower levels of instructional responsiveness. They identified communication barriers, unfamiliarity with local cultural practices, and, as expressed by NST01, a perceived lack of shared values as significant challenges to effective teaching. NST13's description of performing "my duty" without developing a genuine sense of belonging closely reflects Berry's conceptualisation of marginalisation, characterised by disconnection from both one's own cultural identity and the host community (Berry, 1997). These findings also support Manojan's (2019) argument that when teachers remain positioned as outsiders to a community's cultural knowledge systems and epistemologies, they may inadvertently reinforce patterns of educational disengagement. Consequently, learning gaps documented in large-scale assessments, such as PARAKH 2024, may reflect not only student-related factors but also relational and cultural disconnects between teachers and the communities they serve (Manojan, 2019).

Institutional Mediation

Although acculturation is fundamentally a personal process, the findings indicate that it is profoundly influenced by institutional conditions that extend beyond the control of individual teachers. The experiences of NST06 and NST07 demonstrate that teachers who received mentoring and professional support adapted to the local cultural context more effectively than those without such guidance. This finding reinforces the broader argument that social validation and supportive professional environments are critical to developing confidence and competence in practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). It also provides classroom-level evidence that complements the findings of PARAKH 2024, which reported that only 40 percent of teachers in the Union Territory have access to structured mentoring and professional support (NCERT, 2025). Furthermore, NST12's observations regarding the disruptive effects of frequent teacher transfers highlight an additional institutional constraint on the acculturation process. Unlike Berry's original acculturation framework, which was primarily

developed to explain the experiences of migrants undergoing relatively stable cultural transitions, the present findings suggest that teachers serving in transferable government positions encounter recurring cycles of cultural adjustment that the model does not fully account for (Berry, 1997, 2005).

Cultural Alignment and Student Learning

A central contribution of this study lies in its attempt to establish a direct relationship between teacher acculturation and the student achievement patterns that PARAKH 2024 reports only at an aggregate level. Teachers who demonstrated an integration orientation consistently reported higher levels of student participation, engagement, and confidence in classroom learning. For instance, NST11's observation that students were able to respond "in their own language first, and then in English" illustrates the progressive development of foundational language competencies through the strategic use of learners' home languages. This finding aligns with the objectives of the NIPUN Bharat Mission and the recommendations of the National Curriculum Framework 2023, both of which recognise the use of children's familiar languages as a cornerstone of foundational literacy and language development (NCERT, 2023). In contrast, classrooms led by teachers whose experiences reflected separation or marginalisation were characterised by limited interaction, teacher-centred instruction, and predominantly mechanical learning practices. These findings are consistent with the national evidence presented by Jabbar et al. (2024), which demonstrates that curricula and pedagogical practices disconnected from the lived experiences of tribal learners contribute to reduced student engagement and, over time, to the significant decline in enrolment observed at higher stages of schooling (Jabbar et al., 2024).

Reinterpreting Berry's Model in an Educational Setting

The findings suggest a conceptual refinement of Berry's fourfold acculturation typology when applied to teacher mobility rather than migration. The experiences of several participants—including NST01's changing interpretation of student silence, NST02's gradual progression from separation toward integration, and NST04's recovery from early acculturative stress—demonstrate that teachers do not occupy a single, fixed acculturation orientation throughout their professional experience. Instead, they may move across different acculturation positions over the course of a single posting, while simultaneously exhibiting different orientations across distinct domains of practice, such as linguistic adaptation, classroom pedagogy, and community engagement (Berry, 1997, 2005). These findings indicate that teacher acculturation is a dynamic, multidimensional, and context-dependent process rather than a stable psychological state. Accordingly, this study proposes the incorporation of a contextual hybridity dimension into Berry's framework for educational settings. Such a refinement recognises that teachers may flexibly combine elements of integration, assimilation, and, at times, separation in response to varying institutional, pedagogical, and community contexts. This more fluid conceptualisation extends Berry's original model by capturing the adaptive strategies teachers employ while negotiating the complex cultural realities of diverse educational environments.

Policy and Pedagogical Implications

These findings have important implications for educational policy, teacher preparation, and professional development in tribal contexts.

First, pre-deployment cultural orientation programmes should be institutionalised for teachers posted to culturally distinct regions such as Car Nicobar. Such programmes should include basic Nicobarese language instruction, an introduction to local sociocultural values and customs, and guidance on culturally appropriate community engagement. Institutionalising these measures would address the deficiencies in professional support identified by PARAKH 2024, which reported limited access to structured mentoring and professional development opportunities for teachers in the Union Territory (NCERT, 2025).

Second, structured mentoring systems should be established to pair newly appointed teachers with experienced colleagues, preferably those possessing prior cross-cultural teaching experience. The positive experiences reported by NST06 and NST07 demonstrate the value of mentoring in facilitating both professional confidence and successful cultural adaptation, reinforcing the importance of sustained institutional support (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Third, curriculum development should intentionally incorporate locally relevant knowledge, examples, and cultural contexts while promoting translanguaging practices that recognise students' home languages as valuable pedagogical resources (García & Li Wei, 2014). The experiences of NST03, NST09, and NST11 illustrate that such practices foster greater student participation, comprehension, and confidence, suggesting that culturally responsive instructional strategies should become an integral component of curriculum planning rather than remaining dependent on individual teacher initiative.

Finally, teacher appraisal and professional standards, including those envisioned under the National Professional Standards for Teachers, should incorporate explicit indicators of cultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy, consistent with the inclusive and equitable vision for education articulated in the National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020).

In sum, the findings affirm that teacher acculturation constitutes a critical determinant of educational quality and equity in tribal contexts. The effectiveness of teaching in culturally diverse settings depends not merely on linguistic adaptation but on the development of meaningful cultural understanding, reciprocal respect, and pedagogical practices that are responsive to learners' social and cultural realities. By strengthening teachers' capacity to engage with the communities they serve, education systems can foster more inclusive learning environments and contribute to narrowing the persistent achievement gaps among Scheduled Tribe learners that continue to be reflected in national assessment findings (NCERT, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the acculturation experiences of non-tribal teachers are fundamental to understanding the persistent learning disparities observed among Scheduled Tribe (ST) students in Car Nicobar. The narratives of the fourteen participating teachers demonstrate that acculturation is not merely a process of personal cultural adjustment but a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing psychological, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions. These dimensions collectively shape teachers' professional identities, instructional practices, and students' educational experiences, indicating that teacher adaptation and student learning outcomes are deeply interconnected rather than separate educational concerns.

Summary of Key Findings

The study yielded four major findings.

First, integration emerged as the most effective acculturation orientation for teaching in the tribal context. Teachers who balanced the preservation of their own cultural identities with meaningful engagement in the Nicobarese community demonstrated more culturally responsive pedagogical practices. They incorporated bilingual instructional strategies, contextualised learning materials, and locally relevant examples while cultivating stronger relationships with students. These practices contributed to greater classroom participation, improved comprehension, and enhanced learner confidence (Berry, 1997, 2005; García & Li Wei, 2014; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Second, teachers whose experiences reflected separation or marginalisation encountered greater professional challenges. Limited cultural engagement resulted in communication barriers, weaker teacher–student relationships, reduced classroom interaction, and greater reliance on teacher-centred and rote instructional methods. These classroom characteristics parallel the learning disparities documented in PARAKH 2024 and suggest that educational underachievement in tribal settings cannot be understood solely through student-level factors but must also be viewed through the lens of teacher–community relationships (Berry, 1997; Jabbar et al., 2024; NCERT, 2025).

Third, the findings demonstrate that acculturation is substantially mediated by institutional conditions. Organisational factors—including structured induction, mentoring, professional support, peer networks, and posting stability—significantly influenced teachers' ability to adapt successfully to the local cultural environment. Teachers who received sustained institutional support reported smoother cultural adjustment,

greater professional confidence, and more effective classroom practice than those who navigated the process independently (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; NCERT, 2025).

Fourth, the study establishes cultural competence as a critical pathway to educational equity. Bridging the cultural distance between non-tribal teachers and ST learners is not an optional enhancement to teaching practice but a prerequisite for creating inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive learning environments. Teacher acculturation therefore emerges as a significant determinant of educational quality in tribal contexts.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends Berry's Acculturation Model beyond its traditional application to migrant adaptation by demonstrating its relevance to teacher mobility within multicultural educational systems (Berry, 1997, 2005). The findings indicate that teacher acculturation is dynamic, multidirectional, and context-dependent. Teachers not only adapt to the host culture but also influence classroom culture and educational practice through their interactions with students and communities, reflecting Berry's broader conceptualisation of acculturation as a reciprocal process occurring within culturally plural societies (Berry, 2005).

More importantly, the study proposes a refinement to Berry's framework through the introduction of a contextual hybridity dimension for educational settings. Rather than occupying a single, stable acculturation orientation, teachers frequently shifted between integration, assimilation, and, occasionally, separation according to changing institutional demands, classroom contexts, and community interactions. This multidimensional and fluid pattern of adaptation suggests that teacher acculturation cannot be adequately explained through fixed categorical orientations alone. Incorporating contextual hybridity therefore enhances the explanatory power of Berry's model for understanding professional adaptation within culturally diverse educational environments.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings have significant implications for educational policy, teacher preparation, and school leadership. Cultural orientation programmes should become a mandatory component of teacher deployment to tribal regions, equipping teachers with foundational knowledge of local language, cultural practices, community values, and indigenous knowledge systems before assuming their responsibilities. Such preparation should be complemented by structured mentoring, reflective supervision, and professional learning communities that support teachers throughout the acculturation process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; NCERT, 2025).

Teacher education institutions should embed intercultural competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, and multilingual instructional approaches within both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes. Curriculum developers should encourage the integration of locally relevant content and translanguaging practices that value students' home languages as pedagogical assets rather than barriers to learning (García & Li Wei, 2014).

At the school level, stronger partnerships with the Nicobarese community should be institutionalised through regular parent–teacher engagement, collaboration with local knowledge holders, storytelling initiatives, and the integration of indigenous knowledge into classroom learning. Such collaborative approaches reflect international evidence demonstrating that authentic partnerships between schools and indigenous communities contribute to sustainable educational improvement (Bishop et al., 2019).

For teachers themselves, the study highlights the importance of reflective practice, cultural humility, and empathy. Teachers who approach cultural diversity as a resource for learning rather than a challenge to overcome are better positioned to create inclusive classrooms where students feel respected, valued, and empowered to participate actively in the learning process.

Limitations and Future Research

While the qualitative design enabled an in-depth exploration of teachers' lived experiences, the findings are necessarily limited by the study's focus on a single district and a relatively small sample of participants.

Consequently, the results should be interpreted within their contextual setting rather than generalised uncritically to other tribal regions.

Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches to examine the relationship between teachers' acculturation orientations and student learning outcomes across multiple tribal communities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and elsewhere in India. Longitudinal studies following teachers throughout an entire posting cycle would provide valuable insights into how acculturation evolves over time and how institutional interventions influence this process. Further research may also investigate collaborative models of curriculum development that incorporate genuine power-sharing with indigenous communities, thereby extending culturally responsive educational practice beyond consultation toward sustained educational partnership (Bishop et al., 2019).

Concluding Reflection

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that education in tribal contexts is fundamentally both a cultural and an academic endeavour. Teacher effectiveness cannot be separated from cultural understanding, because meaningful learning occurs within relationships of trust, mutual respect, and cultural recognition. Non-tribal teachers in Car Nicobar occupy a unique position at the intersection of two knowledge systems—the pedagogical traditions they bring with them and the rich cultural worldview of the Nicobarese community. When these knowledge systems engage in dialogue through empathy, respect, and reciprocal learning, education moves beyond the transmission of curriculum to become a transformative process for both teachers and students.

As India advances towards the goals of inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education envisioned in the National Education Policy 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goals, strengthening the cultural competence and institutional support available to teachers serving in tribal regions should be recognised not as a peripheral administrative concern but as a strategic national priority for achieving educational equity and social justice (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020).

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