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Impact Factor (Cosmos: 6.262 & I2OR: 3.585)

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Cultural Challenges and Adjustment among Students Experiencing Inter-State Mobility in India

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Citation: Latha, R. & Devika, D. (2026). Cultural Challenges and Adjustment among Students Experiencing Inter-State Mobility in India. *Exploresearch*, 03(03), 104–109. <https://doi.org/10.62823/exre/03.03.260>

Article History:

Received: 08 September 2026

Revised: 16 September 2026

Accepted: 24 September 2026

Published: 26 September 2026

Keywords:

Inter-State Student Mobility, Cultural Challenges, Cultural Awareness, Student Adjustment, Intercultural Sensitivity, Higher Education, India.

Abstract: India has different languages, food habits, customs and ways of life across its states. When students move from one state to another for higher education, they may have to adjust to a new cultural and social environment along with their academic life. This paper examines the cultural challenges and adjustment of students experiencing inter-state mobility in India. The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from published research papers, review studies and official sources. The review shows that language, food, communication, social interaction and unfamiliar local practices can affect student adjustment. It also shows that friendship, cultural awareness and institutional support can make adjustment easier. The study concludes that simple orientation programmes, peer support and basic local-language assistance can help students understand cultural differences and settle more comfortably in a new environment.

Introduction

India is a country with considerable differences in language, food, customs and social practices. These differences can be seen even between neighbouring states. Because of this, a student who moves from one state to another for higher education may experience changes that go beyond academics.

Students move to other states for different reasons, including access to educational institutions and courses. The Census of India records education as one of the reasons for migration, although these migration figures cover the general population and cannot be treated as a direct measure of higher-education student mobility.

For students, some differences may be noticed immediately. The language used outside the classroom may be unfamiliar. Food in the hostel or nearby places may be different from what the student is used to at home. There may also be differences in the way people communicate, greet one another, interact with teachers and make friends.

These differences do not necessarily create serious problems. Many students gradually become comfortable with the new environment. However, adjustment may take some time. A behaviour that is considered normal in one place may be understood differently somewhere else. In such cases, the difficulty may simply come from different ways of communicating and understanding each other. Language is one area where this difference can be clearly seen. Zieliński (2021) specifically examined language as an interstate migration barrier in India and discussed how India's multilingual nature can create difficulties for people moving between states.

Some Indian studies have directly looked at students who study away from their home state. Khan and Hasan (2016) examined cultural intelligence among 200 North Indian engineering students studying in colleges in Warangal district, Telangana. George and Sridevi (2022) studied 120 outstation students in Bengaluru. Singson, Syiem and Singson examined intercultural sensitivity among postgraduate students from different states at Pondicherry University, and Lavanya et al. (2026) studied interstate students in Bangalore in relation to adaptation, social integration and lifestyle challenges.

The present study brings these findings together to understand the everyday cultural difficulties faced by students moving between Indian states and the role of cultural awareness and social support in making adjustment easier.

Literature Review

• **Student Mobility and Cultural Adjustment**

Much of the literature on student adjustment has focused on international students. Although international movement and movement between Indian states are not the same, this literature is useful because both situations involve entering an unfamiliar social and cultural environment.

Andrade (2006), in a review of international students in English-speaking universities, identified language proficiency and cultural differences as important factors affecting adjustment. Zhang and Goodson (2011), after reviewing 64 studies, also identified factors such as stress, social support, language proficiency, acculturation and social interaction as important predictors of psychosocial adjustment.

These studies cannot be directly applied to all students moving between Indian states. They do, however, show that adjustment is not only an academic matter. The language used in daily life, relationships with others and the support available in the new environment also matter.

The Indian studies provide more direct evidence. Khan and Hasan (2016) studied 200 North Indian engineering students who had moved to colleges in Warangal district, Telangana. Their main purpose was to validate the 20-item Cultural Intelligence Scale. The study found significant associations between the cultural-intelligence factors and acculturative stress.

George and Sridevi (2022) studied 120 outstation students in Bengaluru from different regional groups. Their study examined perceived discrimination, sociocultural adaptation and well-being. They found relationships among these areas and identified language and food among the difficulties reported by students. They also noted factors such as diversity and opportunities in the city that could support adjustment. Importantly, the study did not find significant differences in perceived discrimination across the regional groups studied.

More recently, Lavanya et al. (2026) studied 53 interstate students in Bangalore. Their findings pointed to better educational and career opportunities as important reasons for moving to Bangalore, while higher living costs and an initial language barrier were among the difficulties. Most students reported adjusting over time, and friendship and social integration were important to their overall experience. Together, these studies suggest that interstate student mobility is not simply a movement from one college to another. For many students, it also means getting used to a different social environment.

• **Everyday Adaptation: Language, Food and Daily Living**

Language is often one of the first differences noticed by students after moving to another state. A student may understand the language used for teaching and examinations but still find it difficult to follow conversations outside the classroom. This is particularly relevant in everyday situations such as hostels, shops, public transport and communication with people in the neighbourhood. Zieliński (2021) discusses this issue in the wider context of interstate migration in India. George and Sridevi (2022) also identified language as one of the reasons for negative experiences and adaptation difficulties among

outstation students in Bengaluru. Food is another part of daily adjustment. Students who move away from home may find that the food available in hostels and nearby places is different from what they normally eat. George and Sridevi (2022) included food among the factors that could make adjustment more difficult. At the same time, language and food need not remain barriers. Students can gradually learn commonly used local words and expressions. Food can also become a way of bringing students together when they share their own food habits and learn about those of others.

This suggests that everyday adjustment is not only about the student changing according to the new environment. Interaction with people around the student can also make the process easier.

- **Communication, Social Interaction and Cultural Awareness**

Differences between students are not limited to language. People may have different ways of speaking, greeting, showing respect, making jokes or expressing disagreement. Sometimes a misunderstanding can happen even when there is no intention to offend. Cultural intelligence can be useful in such situations. Ang et al. (2007) described cultural intelligence as the ability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations and examined its relationship with cultural judgment, adaptation and performance. Khan and Hasan (2016) applied the measurement of cultural intelligence to a within-country student setting, showing that this area is relevant even when students have not crossed national borders. Intercultural sensitivity is another related area. Chen and Starosta (2000) developed and tested the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale using college students. Singson, Syiem and Singson used this scale with 100 postgraduate students from different states at Pondicherry University. Their study did not find significant differences in intercultural sensitivity based simply on students' state, gender, subject stream or Northeast/non-Northeast background. However, they found a significant difference between students living in university hostels and those who were not campus residents. This finding is useful because it points towards the importance of the environment in which students interact. Regular contact with other students may provide opportunities to understand people from different backgrounds.

Social support also matters. Shu et al. (2020), in a study of 276 international students, found that support from friends and the institution was related to adjustment. They also found that cultural diversity and the presence of host-country students in students' social networks were important for cross-cultural adjustment. Although the Shu et al. study was conducted among international students, its basic message is relevant here: students are likely to adjust more easily when they have opportunities to build relationships in the new environment. This is also seen in the recent Indian study by Lavanya et al. (2026), where friendship and social integration were important to student satisfaction.

- **Institutional Support and Practical Orientation**

The role of the college or university should not be overlooked. Students may be able to adjust on their own, but institutions can make the process easier by providing some basic support when students first arrive.

Sit, Mak and Neill (2017) reviewed 35 studies on cross-cultural training in tertiary education. Their review found stronger evidence for programmes that included behavioural elements rather than only giving information about another culture.

Similarly, Aljaberi et al. (2021) reviewed 14 studies involving 824 international students and found evidence that psychoeducational and sociocultural interventions could support adjustment. Their review also considered cultural orientation and peer-pairing approaches.

These studies suggest that simply telling students about cultural differences may not be enough. Opportunities to interact, ask questions and experience the new environment can be more useful.

For interstate students in India, such support does not have to be complicated. A short orientation about the local language and everyday practices, a student buddy system, mixed-group activities and opportunities to share food and cultural experiences may be enough to make the initial adjustment easier.

- **Need for the Study**

Research has already examined different parts of interstate student adjustment in India. Cultural intelligence has been studied among within-country migrated engineering students, while sociocultural adaptation and perceived discrimination have been examined among outstation students in Bengaluru. Intercultural sensitivity has also been studied among students from different Indian states, and recent research has looked at interstate student migration, social integration and lifestyle changes in Bangalore.

The research gap is therefore not that the subject has never been studied. The gap is that these studies have looked at the issue from different angles. Some have focused on cultural intelligence, some on adaptation and well-being, some on intercultural sensitivity and others on social integration and lifestyle. There is scope to bring these findings together and look more closely at the everyday experience of students moving between Indian states. In particular, language, food, communication, friendship and unfamiliar local practices can be considered together rather than as separate issues. Another point that deserves attention is misunderstanding. Cultural differences do not always result in discrimination or open conflict. Sometimes a student may simply behave in a way that is normal in the home environment, while another student understands the same behaviour differently. The present study therefore looks at adjustment as a process involving both the student who moves and the people in the new environment. The student has a role in understanding the local culture, while the host institution and other students can also make the environment more welcoming.

- **Objectives of the Research**

The main objective of this study is to examine the cultural challenges experienced by students who move from one Indian state to another for higher education, with particular attention to language, food, communication, social interaction and unfamiliar local practices. The study also aims to understand how these differences may affect adjustment and how cultural awareness, peer interaction and institutional support can help students settle into a new environment.

- **Methodology**

The study is based entirely on secondary data. Published research papers, review studies and official sources were selected for the study based on their relevance to interstate student mobility, cultural adjustment, cultural intelligence, intercultural sensitivity, language barriers and social support. Searches were made using combinations of terms such as *interstate student mobility in India*, *outstation students*, *student adjustment*, *cultural intelligence*, *intercultural sensitivity*, *language barriers*, *social integration* and *higher education*. Priority was given to peer-reviewed studies that directly examined students, within-country movement or adjustment to a new cultural environment. Indian studies were given greater importance, while selected international studies were used only to support the discussion of adjustment, social support and orientation. Official Census information was used only for background on education as a recorded reason for migration. The study follows a descriptive and analytical approach. No primary survey has been conducted and no new percentages, responses or statistical results have been created.

Analysis and Discussion

- **Everyday Adjustment and the First Experience of a New State**

When students move to another state, adjustment begins with ordinary things. The language heard around them may be different, food may be unfamiliar and the way people interact may not be what they are used to. The Indian studies show that these experiences are not identical for all students. George and Sridevi (2022) found that language and food were among the difficulties reported by outstation students in Bengaluru, while Lavanya et al. (2026) reported an initial language barrier and higher living costs among interstate students in Bangalore. At the same time, both studies show that adjustment can improve with time and interaction. This is important because it suggests that an initial difficulty does not necessarily remain a long-term problem.

- **Communication and the Possibility of Misunderstanding**

Language is only one part of communication. Even when two students can speak a common language, they may have different ways of expressing themselves. For example, direct communication may be normal for one student but may be seen as rude by another. Similarly, ways of showing respect, making jokes or disagreeing can vary. Such situations may create discomfort without either person intending to cause a problem. The work on cultural intelligence by Ang et al. (2007) helps explain why the ability to notice and respond to cultural differences can be useful in such situations. The work of Khan and Hasan (2016) also shows that cultural intelligence is relevant to students who move within India. The important point is that cultural awareness does not mean learning every custom of every state. It simply means being willing to pause before judging another person's behaviour.

- **Friendship and Social Integration**

The ability to make friends appears repeatedly in the literature as an important part of adjustment. Lavanya et al. (2026) found that friendship and social integration were important to the satisfaction of

interstate students in Bangalore. A similar pattern can be seen in international student research. Shu et al. (2020) found that support from friends and institutions was associated with adjustment and that diverse social networks were useful. The finding from Singson et al. that hostel residents differed from non-residents in intercultural sensitivity is also worth noting. Living and interacting with students from different backgrounds may provide more opportunities for students to understand one another. Therefore, colleges can play a useful role simply by creating more opportunities for students from different states to interact rather than allowing students to remain only within their own regional groups.

- **Support from the Institution**

The literature suggests that institutions can make the transition easier, particularly during the early period. Sit et al. (2017) found stronger evidence for cross-cultural training programmes that included practical or behavioural elements. Aljaberi et al. (2021) similarly found evidence that psychoeducational and sociocultural interventions can support student adjustment. For interstate students, this can be adapted into simple campus practices. A short orientation programme can introduce students to basic local language expressions, transport, food options and common campus practices. A student-led buddy system can connect newcomers with students who are already familiar with the institution. Mixed-group activities, cultural programmes and student clubs can also help students interact naturally. These measures do not require students to give up their own culture. The purpose is simply to make it easier for students from different backgrounds to understand each other.

- **Adjustment is a Two-Way Process**

The literature does not support placing the entire responsibility for adjustment on students who move to another state. A student entering a new environment should make an effort to understand and respect the local culture. At the same time, students and institutions in the host environment can also help newcomers feel comfortable. This is particularly important because broad statements about students from a particular state or region may not be accurate. Singson et al. (2024) did not find significant differences in intercultural sensitivity simply on the basis of students' states or regional background. George and Sridevi (2022) also did not find significant differences in perceived discrimination across the regional groups included in their study. The focus should therefore be on individual experiences rather than assumptions about an entire state or group.

Findings

The study shows that students moving between Indian states may face difficulties in everyday adjustment, particularly with language, food, communication and social interaction. These difficulties can become easier with time, friendship and support. The review also shows that cultural awareness and practical interaction can help students understand differences and avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. At the same time, the available studies do not support general assumptions about students based only on their state or regional background.

Implications and Limitations

Higher education institutions can support interstate students through simple orientation programmes, student buddy systems, basic local-language assistance and mixed-group activities. These measures can encourage interaction without making students feel that they have to change their own culture. The study is limited to secondary data and does not include primary responses from students. The available Indian studies also differ in their samples, locations and research methods. Future studies can use primary data from students across different states to understand their experiences in greater detail.

Conclusion

Students moving to another state for higher education may have to adjust to differences in language, food, communication and social practices. The studies reviewed in this paper show that these differences can influence the adjustment experience, but they do not necessarily become long-term problems. Cultural awareness, friendship and institutional support can make the transition easier. Colleges can provide simple support such as student buddy programmes, basic local-language guidance and activities that encourage students from different states to interact. Adjustment is also a two-way process. Students who move to a new state should make an effort to understand the local environment, while host institutions and other students can also help create an open and comfortable atmosphere. In this way, cultural differences can become an opportunity for students to understand and learn from one another rather than a reason for misunderstanding.

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