

Research Paper

## Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention

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### ABSTRACT

Clinical psychology is an applied area of psychology that studies, assesses, and treats mental health issues or disorders. Clinical psychology, as one of the most important intervention-based professions in the mental health sector, has been steadily but gradually increasing in India. As a professional field, it plays an important function and has a wide range of applications in sustaining mental health and enhancing people's well-being. The purpose of this study is to share information about clinical psychology and clinical psychologists in Northeast India. The material was acquired through a literature search as well as personal discussion with clinical psychology professionals, trainees, and students. The article also focused on postgraduate and doctoral studies in psychology in northeast India. Despite existing inadequacies, the area of clinical psychology has attracted significant attention in recent years, with an increase in referrals and trained professionals in northeast India.

**Keywords:** *Clinical Psychology, Clinical Psychologist, Northeast India*

Mental health may be defined as the absence of mental illness or as a state of being that incorporates biological, psychological, and social elements that influence an individual's mental state and capacity to operate in the environment (Manwell et al, 2015). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”. This definition, while representing significant progress in moving away from the conceptualization of mental health as the absence of mental illness, raises several concerns and lends itself to potential misunderstandings by identifying positive feelings and positive functioning as key factors for mental health.

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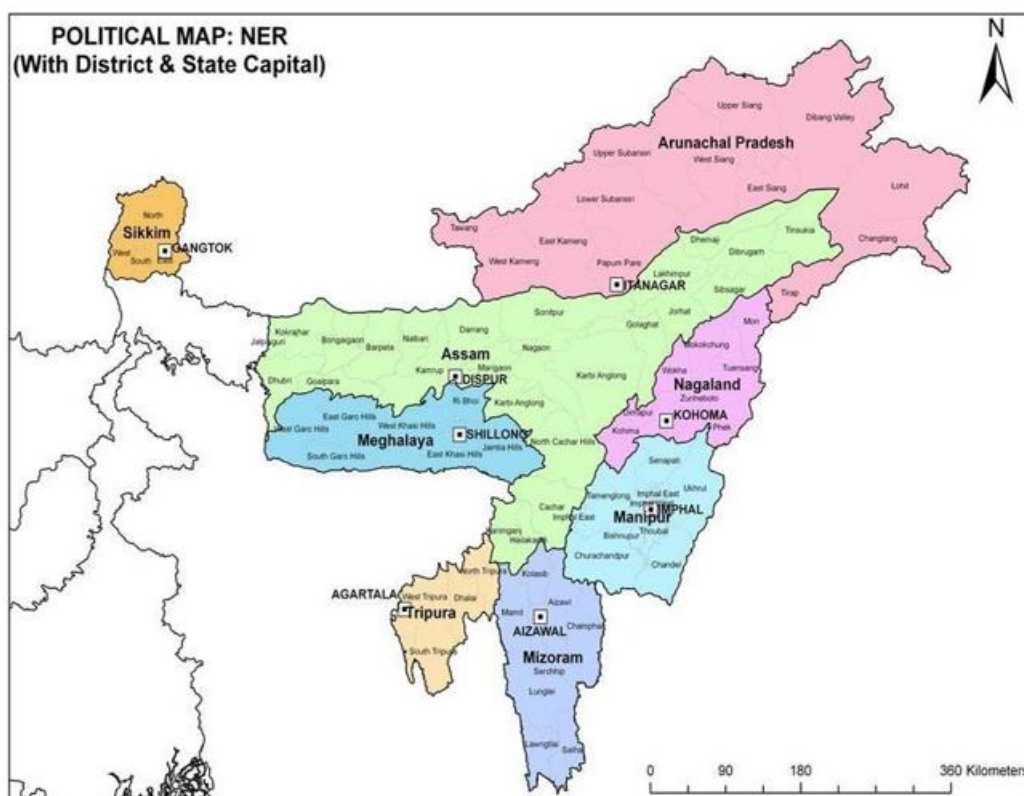
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## Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention

### *Northeast India*

The Northeastern region of India consists of eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim. The regional states vary greatly in terms of population makeup, topography, culture, and economic development. The northeastern region of India has 3.8 percent of the total population and 7.76 percent of the country's geographical area. The entire region is largely rural, with more than 80% of the inhabitants residing in villages. Over 200 of the country's 635 tribal communities are in the Northeastern area, with most of them living in the hill states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh, where they account for most of the population. In four states, namely Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, indigenous people make up most of the population. (Nandi, 2017).



*Fig 1. Map of Northeast India (Rao, 2009)*

### *Mental Health in India*

India, with a population of 1.027 billion, is a diverse country with a predominantly rural population and 36% living below the poverty line. The country has been a pioneer in health services planning, focusing on primary health care. However, only a small percentage of the total annual budget is spent on health, and mental health is part of general health services. India's multicultural traditional society encourages people to seek modern health services whenever possible. Public policy and judicial enactments have addressed the stigma attached to mental illnesses and the rights of mentally ill people in society. Epidemiological surveys show high rates of mental morbidity in rural and urban areas, comparable to global rates.

Despite India's well-placed trained manpower in general health services, mental health trained personnel are limited, mostly based in urban areas. The development of mental

## **Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention**

health services has been linked with general health services and primary health care. Training opportunities for various mental health personnel are gradually increasing in academic institutions, and private psychiatric services are growing to fill gaps in public mental health services. Non-governmental organizations have initiated activities related to rehabilitation programs, human rights of mentally ill people, and school mental health programs. Despite these efforts, much more needs to be done in training, research, and clinical services to promote mental health in all sections of society (Khandelwal et. al, 2004). Mental disorders vary across time and within populations, impacting planning, funding, and healthcare delivery. Mental health is a state of well-being where individuals can realize their abilities, cope with life's stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community (Reddy et. al, 2021).

### ***History Psychology in India***

Psychology has been maturing in India for about a century and represents both Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. In 1905, Calcutta University made a significant contribution by introducing experimental psychology in India. A decade later, in 1916, the same university established the first Department of Psychology in India, a pivotal moment in the discipline's formalization in India (Prasadarao & Sudhir, 2001). The Indian Psychological Association was formed in 1925. Later, the post-independence era saw further advancements, with the Indian Psychiatric Society becoming independent in 1947.

By 1955, the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru began offering a two-year post-MA course in clinical psychology, paving the way for specialized training in this field (Sharan & Tripathi, 2021). This was followed by the introduction of a Diploma in Medical and Social Psychology at CIP, Ranchi in 1962 (Sharan & Tripathi, 2021). The Indian Association of Clinical Psychology (IACP) was established in 1968, serving as the chief body for the growth and development of clinical psychology. In 1974, the Indian Journal of Clinical Psychology was launched from Chandigarh, providing a platform for scholarly discourse and research in the field.

The 1990s brought significant regulatory developments with the start of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) Act in 1993, which aimed to standardize and regulate the clinical psychology profession. By 1995, the RCI had begun monitoring the standards and objectivity in clinical psychology practice across the country, ensuring the discipline's growth was both rigorous and ethical (Nehra et. al, 2016). In recent years, the Clinical Psychology Society of India (CPSI) was established to act as a new representative body for Clinical Psychologists in India.

### ***Clinical Psychology Training in Northeastern India***

Formal training in professional-clinical psychology began in 1955 at NIMHANS, followed by a comparable program at CIP. The current apex governing organization in India is the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI). To meet the requirement of developing a quality human resource in the field of clinical psychology for independent consultant-level practice, the RCI established three professional clinical psychology programs: M.Phil. in Clinical Psychology, Psy.D., and Professional Diploma in Clinical Psychology. The M.Phil. in Clinical Psychology is a two-year professional training program that is regarded as the minimum professional education requirement for clinical practice or teaching in the discipline. It is also the minimum necessary professional certification to become a registered clinical psychologist in India (RCI, 2016). Following the establishment of the Rehabilitation

## Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention

Council of India, professional education in clinical psychology expanded rapidly. Currently, over 30 institutes provide clinical psychology training programs. Despite various national initiatives, there is an urgent need to review and monitor the quality of clinical education and training in the sector. Even if the discipline's current state is encouraging in terms of future development, some challenges must be overcome before it can be established as a prominent profession in mental health. There is also a demand for skilled specialists in the population to treat the rapidly growing number of mental health issues (Sharan & Tripathi, 2021).

**Table 1: List of institutes offering M.Phil. Clinical Psychology training program approved by the Rehabilitation Council of India (as of August 2024).**

Northeast Indian State	Institute	No. of Total Seats
Assam	Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health, Tezpur	12
Manipur	Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal	06
Mizoram	Mizoram University, Aizawl	10
Tripura	ICFAI University, Agartala	10

### ***Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health, Tezpur, Assam***

The Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health (LGBRIMH) was founded as Tezpur Lunatic Asylum by the British government in April 1876. The Institute was subsequently renamed the "Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health." On June 1, 2007, the Institute was taken over by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of India. The Department of Clinical Psychology was established in 2002 as an independent department. From 2002 to 2010, the department's primary focus was on providing clinical services to patients and families who visited the outpatient and inpatient units. M.Phil., a Clinical Psychology training program (accredited by the Rehabilitation Council of India and connected with Gauhati University), was launched in 2011. Since then, students from all over the country, including the Northeastern states, have been taught to become mental health professionals and registered clinical psychologists. The department has made a name for itself and is now the premier Clinical Psychology training centre in the Eastern/North-eastern region.

### ***Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal, Manipur***

The Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal is in Lamphelpat, Imphal, Manipur. The Medical College was founded as a collaborative effort amongst the Northeastern states. On April 1, 2007, the Institute was transferred to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of India. It is a regionally important institution that serves the needs of the Northeastern Region. The Department of Clinical Psychology at RIMS, Imphal is the only one of its kind in the Northeastern region, and it oversees providing clinical psychology training and generating professional clinical psychologists for all seven states. Since 2003, the department has given more than 50 professional clinical psychologists to the Northeast region. The department has made major contributions to the region's psychiatric and psychosocial service efficiency over the previous 6 - 7 years. The theoretical orientation is primarily cognitive-behavioural; however, the department is open to alternative viewpoints. The multidisciplinary approach leads students through their clinical work. As part of a general hospital, the department collaborates with other health care departments such as neurology, neurosurgery, paediatrics, medicine, and other specialised departments, and it

## **Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention**

addresses psychological issues associated with physical diseases, exemplifying primary health care delivery in this region. In all its functions and actions, the department is inextricably related to the psychiatric department (Kumar, 2010).



*Photo Plate 1: RIMS Main Gate (Author)*

### ***ICFAI University, Agartala, Tripura***

The ICFAI University, Tripura was founded in 2004 by an Act of the State Legislature (Tripura Act 8, 2004). The University has gained approval from The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, to provide the bachelor's program in education through its constituent institution, the Faculty of Special Education. RCI maintains a list of approved institutions, which includes ICFAI University, Tripura. The Department of Clinical Psychology offers a two-year full-time M.Phil. degree in Clinical Psychology that is RCI accredited. Clinical psychology, as a core discipline in mental health/illness, has grown dramatically during the previous two decades.

### ***Mizoram University, Aizawl, Mizoram***

The Department of Clinical Psychology at Mizoram University was established in 2019. The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), Government of India, has approved the establishment of a two-year regular M. Phil. (Clinical Psychology) program with ten seats beginning in the 2023 academic session. The Department seeks to provide quality teaching and training at the M.Sc., M.Phil., and Ph.D. levels, as well as to develop educated, well-trained professionals to meet the needs of managing/treating persons with mental health disorders throughout North-East India, particularly in the state of Mizoram. The Department of Clinical Psychology's qualified personnel will be useful in offering necessary and effective counselling, guiding, and psychotherapeutic services to Mizoram residents.

## Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention



*Photo Plate 2: Mizoram University Main Gate (Author)*

The availability of well-equipped training facilities is crucial for the correct development of clinical psychology. The Government of India has made constant efforts, and the number of recognized centres has steadily increased over time. However, significant challenges remain, including the provision of exposure and experience in diverse clinical and professional settings relevant for clinical psychology trainees, the availability of required supervisory staff with tenure longevity to ensure experienced supervision in the institutions, the presence of adequate complementary resources for the trainee's learning and professional development, and the presence of program monitoring and development (Sharan & Tripathi, 2021).

Clinical psychology training at Northeastern operates at a snail's pace. The existing institutions work diligently, but there is a greater need for Clinical Psychology Training Institutes in the region. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Sikkim currently have no MPhil in Clinical Psychology training programs. Due to a severe dearth of clinical psychology training and limited seats in the region, northeastern students have to travel around India, which can be financially difficult and unpleasant for the student. There is currently no centralized mechanism of examination for clinical psychology. High competition, as well as the various rules and regulations of different universities for MPhil entry exams and interviews, can be perplexing and unclear for students at times. This can cause the aspiring clinical psychologist great distress. It should also be noted that courses such as PDCP (one-year professional clinical psychology training program) and PsyD. are not offered in the region. However, clinical psychologists (associates) are from the region, which implies they received their requisite training from other parts in India. The number of clinical psychology aspirants in the northeast is growing, yet there are very few seats available.

***Clinical Psychologist in Northeast India***

Traditionally, clinical psychologists in India worked in psychiatric departments of medical institutions and hospitals. Over the past few decades, the designation "Clinical Psychologist" has achieved widespread recognition and acceptability in major cities. However, in rural and semi-rural areas, this profession's identity remains mixed with that of other mental health professions. The Government of India is constantly working to recruit and employ clinical psychologists at the district level under the National Mental Health Program. Currently, eligible and licensed clinical psychologists work regularly in the central and state medical institutional infrastructure, including district-level mental health institutes, Centres of Excellence, rehabilitation centres, forensic centres, child and guidance centres, private hospitals, universities, and research institutes. Many clinical psychologists prefer to have their private practice for professional services and consultations (Sharan & Tripathi, 2021). The number of clinical psychologists accessible over time is unknown, however it must be less than 0.07 per one hundred thousand Indians. Also, it is worth noting that all psychologists were unfairly "lumped" into a single professional category. In reality, they are educated and trained for a wide variety of professional situations (Sharan & Tripathi, 2021). This indicates the inadequate state of professional psychology at the highest levels of the country, especially clinical psychology. Kerala has the highest frequency of clinical psychologists, with 0.6 per lakh population (Singh, 2023).

***Table 2: State Wise Information on Clinical Psychologists in the Northeastern States of India as of July 2024, Rehabilitation Council of India [www.rehabcouncil.nic.in](http://www.rehabcouncil.nic.in)***

<b>Northeast Indian States</b>	<b>Clinical Psychologist</b>	<b>Clinical Psychologist Associate</b>
Arunachal Pradesh	3	0
Assam	83	5
Manipur	73	0
Meghalaya	12	0
Mizoram	16	1
Nagaland	12	0
Sikkim	3	0
Tripura	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>211</b>	

There are extremely few clinical psychologists in the Northeast. Assam has the highest number of clinical psychologists, followed by Manipur. The states with the fewest clinical psychologists are Sikkim and Tripura in the region. Even though there are psychiatry departments in state medical hospitals, central medical institutes, mental health hospitals, and private hospitals in most of the Northeastern states, there is either no clinical psychologist available or clinical psychologists are always hired in small numbers, even though demand is always high, making it difficult for a clinical psychologist to manage a large population. It can cause emotional exhaustion for the expert to deal with multiple instances for a limited time on their own. In other circumstances, recruiting high-quality professionals, such as clinical psychologists, may not be a priority. This is due to the RCI's ineffective regulation and monitoring systems. Despite multiple national attempts, many clinical psychology departments are still administered by ad hoc or contract lecturers. The lack of recruitment and relevance of clinical psychologists is always a problem for people seeking mental health treatment in both urban and rural parts of the Northeast.

## **Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention**

Many clinical psychologists work independently in private practice since advertised government positions pay very little on a contractual basis. However, private practice might result in professional isolation and alienation from the growth of the field. Additionally, starting and maintaining a private practice might be difficult at first. As a result, in the absence of suitable environments for quality professional practice aimed at imparting clinical education, training, clinical practice, and evidence-based knowledge creation, several trained clinical psychologists are forced to choose between leaving the country in search of better professional environments or entering academia. In any case, the availability and quality of clinical practice at the national level remain limited (Sharan & Tripathi, 2021). Due to a shortage of potential jobs, clinical psychologists in this region relocate to mainland India for better work opportunities in hospitals and clinical settings, or many pursue teaching or higher education for job stability, resulting in a 'brain drain' in the region. Most of the region's government medical colleges lack clinical psychology lecturers or non-teaching staff, therefore recruiting is limited.

Upon completion of an approved M.Phil. program in Clinical Psychology, candidates must register with the RCI, a status that is renewable every five years, to be acknowledged and allowed to practice. During this time, practitioners must engage in continuing rehabilitation education (CRE) activities; to facilitate renewal, they must accrue a minimum of 100 points. The renewal process requires the filing of an online application after the necessary points are obtained (Singh, 2023). Because there aren't many CRE programs in the northeast, clinical psychologists from that area must travel to major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, and so on.

### ***Postgraduate Level in Psychology and Clinical Psychology in Northeast India***

The journey of an aspiring psychologist in India starts at the undergraduate level with a three-year bachelor's degree which aims to inculcate the theoretical foundations of psychology. An Honors program offers one major with two minor electives. After this lies a two-year post-graduation program (M.A./ M. Sc.) which allows the student to specialize in a subfield like Counselling, Clinical, Industrial, Education, or Child Psychology, along with an introduction to research methodology. The completion of which confers them the title of 'Psychology' (Kumar & Sadasivan, 2016).

Beginning with ancient traditions of plant-based healing practices for mental ailments, the Northeast of India has since slowly embraced the science of modern psychology. Over the years, several institutions offering postgraduate psychology programs designed to meet the unique mental health needs of the region have sprung up. The earliest formal psychology course in the region began at Maharaja Bir Bikram College in Agartala, Tripura, in 1962. This was followed by the establishment of the first university-level psychology department in Northeast India at the Mizoram campus of Northeastern Hill University (NEHU) in Aizawl in 1983. However, after the creation of Mizoram University, the department shifted under its jurisdiction. Gauhati University, the oldest university in the region, launched its Department of Psychology in 1986, with Nono College becoming its first college to offer an undergraduate degree in psychology in 1998 (Borooah, 2021).

Postgraduate and specialized clinical psychology programs have proliferated in recent decades. Martin Luther Christian University in Shillong, Meghalaya, offers an M.Sc. in Counselling Psychology in 2006. Sikkim University in Gangtok established its Department of Psychology in 2009, offering B.Sc., M.Sc., and Ph.D. programs. Nagaland University



## Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention

followed in 2012 with an MA in psychology and has since expanded to include Ph.D. offerings. Similarly, Tripura University introduced its M.Sc. in Applied Psychology in 2012, with dual specializations in Clinical and Organizational Psychology (Borooah, 2021). In Assam, private institutions such as Assam Downtown University and Royal Global University in Guwahati have emerged as providers of undergraduate and postgraduate education in psychology, particularly in clinical psychology. These institutions have contributed to the increasing availability of psychology education in the region (Borooah, 2021).

Many organizations and NGOs are also present in the region offering mental health services and developing psychology in the region. A registered association of psychologists named Numerous NGOs and mental health organizations are also active in promoting psychology and mental health services across Northeast India. The Psychologists' Association of Northeast India (PANEI), formed in December 2001 under the Department of Psychology at Gauhati University, serves as a representative body for psychologists in the region, with members from Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, and Assam.

Northeast India's postgraduate psychology programs encounter several obstacles that limit their development and efficacy. The lack of skilled instructors with experience in specialized fields like Clinical and Counselling psychology is one of the most urgent problems, which is made worse by the region's inability to draw talent because of its remote locations and meagre financial incentives. Inadequate resources and infrastructure, such as out-of-date lab buildings and restricted access to research databases, exacerbate this problem. Furthermore, many programs' curriculum designs are not culturally relevant, failing to consider the population's different ethnic and linguistic origins. This reduces the application of psychology education to local situations. The programs are further undermined by the dearth of possibilities for supervised clinical training, especially in rural areas where such placements are uncommon, leaving graduates ill-prepared for employment. Financial difficulties continue to be a major obstacle, as many students from low-income families are unable to pay for higher education since there are few scholarships available and few employment opportunities in the area, causing a talent drain.

### *Doctoral Research in Psychology in Northeast India*

**Table 3: List of University/Institutes offering doctoral programs (psychology) in Northeast India**

<b>Northeast Indian States</b>	<b>University/Institute</b>
Arunachal Pradesh	Rajiv Gandhi University (Central)
Assam	Assam Don Bosco University (Private) Assam Downtown University (Private) Assam Royal Global University (Private) Cotton University (State) Gauhati University (State) Girijananda Chowdhury University (Private) IIT Guwahati (Central-Autonomous) LGBRIMH (Central-Autonomous) Tata Institute of Social Science (Deemed-to-be University)
Manipur	Manipur University (Central)
Meghalaya	Martin Luther Christian University, Shillong (Private)
Mizoram	Mizoram University (Central)
Nagaland	Nagaland University (Central)

## Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention

Northeast Indian States	University/Institute
	St. Joseph University (Private)
Sikkim	Sikkim University (Central) Sikkim Manipal University (Private)
Tripura	Tripura University (Central) ICFAI University (Private)

Research in clinical psychology in Northeast India has been slow but is gradually gaining momentum. Early efforts began with institutions like Gauhati University, which awarded its first Ph.D. in psychology in 1990. Research there has since expanded to topics like tribal studies, health psychology, social psychology, and ethnicity. Mizoram University, after separating from NEHU, began research in 2008 focusing on clinical psychology, personality, mental health, and cultural psychology, addressing issues like identity, collectivism, and domestic violence. Newer institutions, such as Sikkim and Tripura Universities, have begun exploring areas such as substance use, suicide, and behaviour modification, while LGBRIMH emphasizes clinical psychology and mental health. However, research faces significant challenges, including difficult terrain, natural disasters, insurgency-related restrictions, and financial constraints. Additionally, a lack of awareness about the importance of psychological research and limited institutional support has made recruiting participants and conducting studies difficult. Furthermore, institutional support remains limited in many universities, with deficits in key resources such as statistical software, psychological tools, and research funding (Borooah, 2021).

### CONCLUSION

Northeastern states are an important portion of India, with great potential in terms of both human and natural resources. However, the nation will not gain from it until it benefits the individuals who live in those states. If not addressed in a timely manner, the entire nation and government would face a very terrible scenario in the future. The government should commit more time, energy, and money to bring these states on pace with the rest of India. Mental health experts should be employed as needed, and schools and colleges should serve as a starting point for instruction in mental diseases and how to aid a patient (Alee et. al, 2018). The demand for psychology is rapidly increasing, as are job opportunities in Northeast India. As a result, colleges are beginning to provide degrees on the subject, and institutes providing psychological assessment, counselling, and therapy are emerging. Private clinics have also entered the professional field, as qualified psychologists return from their studies and training. Thus, despite the limited history of psychology in Northeast India, the future appears to be quite bright and will only get brighter (Borooah, 2021). One should also note that the National Education Policy 2020 was introduced on July 29, 2020 in India. Hence, new reforms in the education system, teaching, and training might appear in the coming times. MPhil is to be discontinued as stated in the NEP 2020; hence a new nomenclature will be there in replacement of M.Phil. In clinical psychology, this has to be decided by UGC & RCI. Given the numerous hurdles confronting clinical psychologists in the northeast area and country, many young students are enthusiastic to pursue a career in clinical psychology in Northeast India. One can anticipate a trend of growth soon. A clinical psychologist continues to face numerous challenges. However, a few areas that require immediate focus in the coming years include addressing the shortage of clinical psychologists and the lack of training institutes in the northeast region; boosting the quality of research; and attempting to recruit clinical psychologists and clinical psychology lecturers in hospitals and medical colleges in northeast India. All these factors would require quick

attention since they may assist bridge the gap between the ever- increasing demand for better patient care and the scarcity of trained professionals available to meet it.

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## Navigating the Development & Challenges of Clinical Psychology in Northeast India – The New Focus of Attention

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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