NAVIGATING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA: POLICY, LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK AND BARRIERS

DR. ANITA SINGH

Assistant Professor,
Department of Education,
Pt.Sundarlal Sharma (Open) University, Chhattisgarh.

NILU RANI

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Education,
Pt.Sundarlal Sharma (Open) University, Chhattisgarh.

==

INTRODUCTION

*"Education must be viewed as a facilitator of human development and functionality for all individuals, regardless of barriers, whether physical or otherwise. Thus, disabilities cannot be used as grounds for exclusion. Inclusion thus involves adopting a broader vision of **Education for All** by addressing the spectrum of needs of all learners" (UNESCO, 2008)*

Inclusion represents the practical realization of the fundamental human right to education (UNESCO, 2005), reflecting societal development and the acceptance of all individuals, regardless of their differences. It emphasizes valuing people for their unique qualities (Sharma & Loreman, 2014) and encourages the appreciation of diversity by recognizing the distinctiveness of each person and their inherent creativity (Mittler, 2000).

The concept of inclusion is not new to Indian society. Since the Vedic period, people with disabilities have been granted equal status and rights alongside others. The ancient treatise *Arthashastra* by Kautilya exemplifies this by advising that the king should support orphans, the elderly, the seriously ill, and the helpless. The Gurukula Ashram system, described in ancient epics, demonstrated inclusion by tailoring education to students' needs and abilities. An illustrative example is found in the *Mahabharata*, where Dhritarashtra, despite his blindness, received education under the Guru Kura and was later crowned king of the Kuru Kingdom, symbolizing unity and integration.

During the colonial era, Christian missionaries established special schools for children with disabilities, marking an early effort toward inclusive education (Rizwana, 2022). Since independence, India has shifted from special education to inclusive education, emphasizing rehabilitation, quality education for children with special needs, and social equity. The Salamanca Declaration (1994) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) have reinforced

this commitment, leading India to pursue multiple pathways to provide quality education for all and encourage the integration of students with special needs into mainstream education. Further the introduction of National Education Policy (NEP 2020) added much more to the scope of Inclusive education as the policy recommends inclusion and equal participation of CWSN across all stages of school education and talks about *Equitable and Inclusive Education and Learning for All*.

CONCEPT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusive education is a multifaceted concept that involves educating children with special needs alongside their peers in the same classroom. It emphasizes valuing diversity, providing support to all students, and tailoring education to meet individual needs. This approach promotes equity, social justice, and the creation of a welcoming, inclusive learning environment. It seeks to address the diverse learning needs of all children, and empowers children with disabilities to recognize and understand their rights, enabling them to contribute to society (UNESCO, 1994; Julka, 2007).

Key Elements of Inclusive Education

- **Access for All Learners**: Inclusive education emphasizes that all children, including those with special needs, should be provided equal access to education. It operates on the belief that education is a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 1994).

- **Diversity as Strength**: In an inclusive classroom, diversity is embraced and celebrated. It rejects segregation or exclusion based on differences and instead promotes integration and full participation and thus this diversity enriches the educational experience for all (Julka, 2007).

- **Adapted Teaching and Learning Methods**: The inclusive education system involves modifying teaching methods, curricula, and classroom environments to accommodate the individual needs of every student (S.C.E.R.T. New Delhi, 2020)

- **Participation and Belonging**: One of the core goals of inclusive education is to create a sense of belonging among all students. Inclusion means that all learners actively participate in both the academic and social aspects of school life. By fostering an inclusive environment, schools create a sense of community where every child feels valued and supported (Booth et al. 2002).

- **Collaboration and Partnership**: Inclusive education is not just about teachers working with students, but also involves collaboration among teachers, parents, and the wider community (NCF, 2005).

Thus, inclusion is an ongoing effort to find better ways to respond to and learn from diversity (UNESCO, 2005) and at the core of inclusive education is the principle that children with special needs should be integrated into mainstream education, asserting that all children, regardless of their difficulties or differences, should learn together in the same environment.

POLICIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Since India's independence, the Government of India has introduced several policies and adopted numerous practices to provide a comprehensive range of services towards the education of children with special needs. The evolution of inclusive education in the country has been shaped by various landmark initiatives and programs over the decades.

In 1964, the Kothari Commission (Education Commission first addressed issues related to access and participation for all sections of society. Following its recommendations, the National Education Policy of 1968 proposed the expansion of educational facilities for children with disabilities and the development of comprehensive plans to include these children in general schools. Building on this, in 1974, the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) program, a centrally sponsored initiative, was introduced. The IEDC aimed to provide equal opportunities for children with disabilities in regular schools, offering comprehensive support for the education and retention of children with mild to moderate disabilities in mainstream educational settings.

The collaboration between the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and UNICEF in 1987 led to the launch of the Project Integrated Education for Disabled Children (PIED), aimed at reinforcing the integration of learners with disabilities into regular schools and promoting inclusion. Building on these efforts, the National Education Policy of 1986 and the Programme of Action (1992) emphasized the importance of integrating children with disabilities into mainstream education, with the goal of preparing them for life with confidence. In 1994-95, the Government introduced the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), incorporating the concept of inclusive education and focusing on integrating children with mild to moderate disabilities into regular schools, making it one of the largest government flagship initiatives. This was followed by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2001-2002, India's flagship program for universalizing elementary education. SSA focused on mainstreaming children with special needs into formal schooling and implemented a "zero rejection" policy to ensure no child was deprived of their right to education. In 2005, the Inclusion in Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) program emphasized inclusive education from early childhood to higher education, aiming to provide

accessible, affordable, and appropriate learning environments. That same year, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) reinforced the need for inclusive curriculum and classroom cultures that motivate teachers to work with students with disabilities.

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) further strengthened the legislative framework for inclusive education, focusing on equal opportunities and rehabilitation for persons with disabilities. In 2009, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) addressed the needs of students with disabilities at the secondary stage, helping them build social skills and confidence. In 2018-19, the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) integrated efforts across all stages of education, with an emphasis on inclusive education. The scheme aimed to provide equitable and quality education for all students, including those with special needs, and aligned its goals with the Sustainable Development Goals for Education (SDG-4)**.** Further, the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) represents a significant advancement toward social justice and equality in education by emphasizing the importance of inclusive teaching practices. The policy envisions "Equitable and Inclusive Education," underscoring the principle that no child should be left behind. It highlights the need for appointing special educators in schools, training teachers to identify learning needs early, and ensuring that teaching methods are inclusive and responsive to the needs of children with special needs.

Through these comprehensive policies and programs, India has demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusive education, ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education within the mainstream system. This reflects the country's dedication to equity, social justice, and the rights of individuals with disabilities.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In India, several key legislations and policies support and promote inclusive education for students with disabilities. The Constitution of India firmly establishes the principle of equality, ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all citizens. Specifically, Article 41 supports the right to work, education, and public assistance in cases of disability. Moreover, the Constitution designates education as a fundamental right, mandating free and compulsory education for all children under the age of 14. The Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995, which provides for equal opportunities, full participation, and protection of rights, reinforces the constitutional commitment to equality by prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities and guaranteeing access to free education in an appropriate environment for children with disabilities up to the age of 18. Before this Act, the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) was established in 1986 to focus on developing trained manpower for the rehabilitation of persons

with disabilities. Additionally, the National Trust Act of 1999 was introduced to support the welfare of individuals with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, and Multiple Disabilities, creating the National Trust to empower these individuals to live independently and integrate fully into their communities. In 2009, the Right to Education (RTE) Act provided a legal framework ensuring every child aged 6-14, including those with disabilities, the right to free and compulsory education in their neighborhood school. This legislation emphasizes equity for all children, with a strong focus on reaching out to marginalized groups, including those with disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016 followed, establishing a comprehensive legal framework for inclusive education. This Act is aligned with India's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), reinforcing the commitment to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities.

India's legislative framework for inclusive education has thus evolved significantly to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children, including those with special needs. These legislative efforts underscore India's commitment to creating an equitable education system that respects and promotes the rights of all students.

BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Although inclusive education is a priority in India and is supported by various laws and programs, the journey toward achieving it is complex and evolving. However this path is marked by numerous barriers which can be both external and internal in nature (Jha, 2007).

Among these barriers, attitudinal barriers—such as the negative and non-cooperating attitudes of stakeholders—pose significant challenges to inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin, 2010; Pijl & Frissen, 2009). Societal barriers and stigma towards disabilities can undermine efforts to promote inclusive education (UNICEF,2019). These societal barriers are further reflected in resistance from educators, parents, and communities, impacting the successful integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms (Forlin, 2010). Additionally, the attitudes and concerns of teachers significantly influence their acceptance and commitment to implementing inclusion. Children with special needs often perceive the attitudes of regular teachers as a significant barrier (Das & Kattumuri, 2013; Jha, 2002).

Furthermore, resource constraints are a major obstacle to effectively advancing inclusive education. Inadequate funding and limited resources often result in subpar learning environments, which impede the successful implementation of inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2013). Many schools in India lack essential infrastructure and assistive technologies needed

to support students with disabilities (Das, 2019). This deficiency in infrastructure is a critical barrier, as many schools are missing key facilities such as ramps, accessible toilets, and appropriate learning environments for children with special needs (Singal, 2019). Effective promotion of inclusive education in India also requires systemic changes at various levels, including curriculum adaptation, teacher training, and community sensitization (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005). Additionally, the implementation of inclusive practices is hindered by a shortage of trained personnel, such as special education teachers and support staff (Sharma et al., 2013). Furthermore, inconsistent policy implementation continues to pose a major challenge to the success of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020).

CONCLUSION: A HOPE FOR CHANGE

India as a nation, is striving hard to improve its education system by focusing on the inclusive approach that is reflected through its policies and positive legislation. But while inclusive education is recognized as a critical priority in India, its effective implementation faces complex challenges and barriers. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including systemic changes at various levels—such as curriculum adaptation, enhanced teacher training, and increased community sensitization. Additionally, ensuring consistent and effective policy implementation across regions is crucial for bridging disparities. By tackling these barriers comprehensively, India can move closer to realizing a truly inclusive educational system that accommodates and supports every student and thus create a hope for further positive change.

REFRENCES

Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion: A review of the literature. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 17*(2), 129-147.

Bhattacharjee, R. (2021). A study of special education and inclusive education in India. *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature,* 9(5), 83-90.

Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2002). Index for inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools. *Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE).* Retrieved from https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index%20English.pdf

Das, A. K. (2019). Challenges and strategies for inclusive education in India. *International Journal of Special Education*, 34(1), 12-25.

Das, A. K., & Kattumuri, R. (2013). Attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education in India. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 41(3), 292-306.

Dua, V., & Dua, A. (2017). Inclusive education: Challenges and barriers. *Paripex - Indian Journal of Research*, 6(1), 856-858.

Forlin, C. (2010). The role of teachers' attitudes and the influence of context in achieving inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(6), 567-584.

Ghosh, B. (2023). Inclusive education: Perspectives, practices and challenges. *Polyphony: Bankura University Journal of Education*, 1(1), 41-51.

Jha M. M. (2002). School Without Walls: Inclusive Education for All Oxford: Heinemann.

Jha, M.M. (2007). Barriers to Access and Success: Is Inclusive Education an Answer? Retrieved from https://oasis.col.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/0adb5e76-5e93-41e9-844b-73df16b20fc9/content

Julka, A. (2005). Index for Developing Inclusive Schools. NCERT: New Delhi. Retrieved from http://www.ncert.nic.in/departments/nie/degsn/pdf_files/INDEX%20FINAL%20FOR%20WEBSITE.pdf

Kaur, S. (2020). Inclusive education and social equity in reference to National Education Policy 2020. Retrieved from https://daveduabh.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Whole-Book-358-pages-Final.pdf#page=104

Kumari, P., & Sharma, S. (2018). Critical analysis of government policies regarding inclusion of children with special needs in India. Retrieved from https://www.dhsgsu.edu.in/images/DAE/publications/SanjaySharma/3.4.5_2018_AIRJ_SS.PDF

Mittler, P. (2000). *Working towards inclusive education: Social contexts.* Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307981845_Working_Towards_Inclusive_Education_Social_Contexts

National Curriculum Framework (NCF). (2005). *National Curriculum Framework 2005*. New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Retrieved from https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/nc-framework/nf2005-english.pdf

National Human Rights Commission, India (2021). Disability Rights (Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act & National Trust Act) and Mental Healthcare Act. Retrieved from https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/DisabilityRights.pdf

NCERT, T. (2011). Position Paper: National Focus Group on Education of Children with Special Needs. Retrieved from https://www.ncert.nic.in/pdf/focus-group/special_ed_final1.pdf

Panigrahi, B. (2024). *Policies and practices for inclusive education in India. International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 12(4), 743-755.

Paul, S., & Chatterjee, B. (2023). Inclusive education in 21st century India, *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)* 10(2), 623-633.

Pijl, S. J., & Frissen, P. H. A. (2009). Inclusive education and the role of teachers in the process of school reform. *Journal of Special Education*, 43(2), 112-121.

Ratheeswari, K., & Nallathambi, K. (2023). Challenges and barriers in implementing inclusive education policies. *International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, 11(Special Issue 1), 77-83

Rizwana, N. V. (2022). Disability and Christian theology in colonial India. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 5(8), 345-360.

Sahoo, S. (2023). *Inclusive education: Constitutional provisions and challenges in India. Polyphony: Bankura University Journal of Education*, 1(1), 165-171.

SCERT, New, Delhi (2022). Manual on Inclusive Education. Retrieved from https://scert.delhi.gov.in/sites/default/files/SCERT/publication%2021-22/manual_on_inclusive_education_scert_11zon.pdf

Sharma, U., & Deppeler, J. (2005). Inclusive education in India: A challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(3), 269-282.

Sharma, U., Armstrong, A. C., Merumeru, L., Simi, J., & Yared, H. (2019). Addressing barriers to implementing inclusive education in the Pacific. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *23*(1), 65-78.

Sharma, U., Loreman, T., & Forlin, C. (2013). *Impact of training on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. International Journal of Special Education, 28*(2), 65-78.

Singal, N. (2019). *Inclusive education in India: Challenges and prospects. Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 29*(3), 157-166.

Srikantha, D. J. (2017). Defining inclusive education in India through the perspectives of educators. Retrieved from https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/286916934.pdf

UNESCO (2020). Global Education Monitoring Report. *Inclusion and Education: Background Paper*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373670

UNESCO, I. (2008). Inclusive education: The way of the future. Conclusions and recommendations of the 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE), Geneva, 25–28 November 2008.

UNESCO. (2005). *Education for all: The quality imperative*. EFA Global Monitoring Report. UNESCO. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000137334

UNESCO. (2017). A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248254

UNICEF. (2017). *Understanding Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.* Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/IE_summary_accessible_220917_0.pdf

UNICEF. (2019). For every child, every right the convention on the rights of the child at a crossroads. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/media/62371/file/Convention-rights-child-at-crossroads-2019.pdf

Ydo, Y. (2020). Inclusive education: Global priority, collective responsibility. *Prospects*, *49*(3), 97-101.