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From Segregation to Inclusion: Assessing India's Journey towards Inclusive Education

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Abstract
India's journey toward inclusive education reflects a significant shift from segregated, charity-based models to a rights-based framework aimed at ensuring equitable access to education for children with disabilities (CWD). Drawing upon historical developments, national policies, international commitments, and recent data, the study examines how inclusive education in India has evolved through various legislative and programmatic milestones, from the "Kothari Commission and IEDC to the Right to Education Act (2009) and the NEP 2020". It explores how policies like the SarvaShikshaAbhiyan and schemes such as SamagraShiksha have shaped infrastructure, curriculum, and teacher training to foster inclusivity. Despite notable progress, evident in increased enrolments and improved accessibility, the paper highlights persistent challenges such as regional disparities, inadequate teacher preparedness, societal stigma, and infrastructural gaps. Through data analysis and illustrative narratives, it argues that while inclusive education has advanced the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities, sustained policy enforcement, attitudinal shifts, and community participation are critical for bridging the gap between intent and impact.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Disability Rights, SarvaShikshaAbhiyan, Right to Education Act, Equity in Education, Persons with Disabilities, Universal Design for Learning

I. Introduction

In a small village in Bihar, 10-year-old Priya, who has cerebral palsy, sits outside her local school, watching other children enter. The school has no ramp, no special educator, and no resources to support her learning. Priya's story is not unique. Across India, millions of children with disabilities face similar exclusion, despite laws that promise them an equal education.

Inclusive education is not just about access, it's about belonging. It ensures that children with disabilities learn alongside their peers in mainstream schools, benefiting from the same opportunities (UNESCO, 2020). In India, where systemic barriers and deep-rooted stigmas have long excluded persons with disabilities (PWDs) from education and employment, inclusive education serves as a critical pathway to equity and social justice (GoI, 2020). By dismantling physical, pedagogical, and attitudinal barriers, it fosters an environment where every child, regardless of ability, can thrive (Ainscow& Miles, 2008).

India has made significant progress in promoting inclusive education through several key policies, including the Right to Education Act (2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and the National Education Policy (2020). These frameworks aim to move away from segregated special schools and promote integrated classrooms, ensuring that persons with disabilities (PWDs) are included in the education system. However, a significant gap remains between policy and implementation (Lakshmi, 2018). Although enrolment rates and literacy levels for PWDs have improved, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and persistent societal biases continue to hinder progress (Singal, 2009).

This research examines:

- **The evolution of inclusive education in India**: from a charity-based approach to a rights-based model.
- **The impact of policies on literacy rates and living standards**: analyzing whether legal guarantees have translated into real change.
- **Persistent barriers**: infrastructure gaps, lack of trained educators, and cultural attitudes that sustain exclusion.

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By weaving together data and human stories like Priya's, this paper highlights both the progress made and the long road ahead in ensuring that inclusive education becomes a reality, not just a promise, for every child in India.

II. Understanding Inclusive Education

2.1 What Does Inclusion Really Mean?

Inclusion is more than just placing children with disabilities in regular classrooms. It's about belonging. Imagine a classroom where Riya, a girl with visual impairment, not only attends but actively participates, her textbooks are in Braille, her teacher describes diagrams aloud, and her classmates include her in group activities without hesitation. This is true inclusion.

As education scholar Mel Ainscow (2005) explains, "Inclusion is about the presence, participation, and achievement of all students." It requires:

- **Adapting teaching methods**: using sign language for deaf students, tactile tools for blind learners, or speech-to-text software for those with dyslexia (UNESCO, 2020).
- **Changing attitudes**: moving from pity to respect, where differences are seen as natural variations in human experience (Singal, 2019).
- **Ensuring full participation**: not just in academics but in sports, arts, and social events (Beattie et al., 2006).

In India, where societal stigma often isolates children with disabilities, inclusion means dismantling barriers, both physical and psychological, so that no child like Priya has to sit outside a school, watching others learn.

2.2 Who Benefits from Inclusive Education?

While often associated with disabilities, inclusive education supports all marginalized learners:

- **Children with disabilities**: physical (e.g., wheelchair users), sensory (deaf/blind), intellectual (Down syndrome), and multiple disabilities (Mitra&Sambamoorthi, 2008).
- **Linguistic minorities**: tribal children forced to learn in Hindi or English when their mother tongue is Gondi or Santhali (Mohanty, 2008).
- **Socio-economically disadvantaged groups**: Dalit and Adivasi children who face caste-based exclusion (Nambissan, 1996).
- **Girls with disabilities**: often denied education due to safety concerns or gendered biases (Singal, 2009).

For example, in Odisha's tribal areas, multilingual education programs have helped Kondh children learn in both their native language and Odia, reducing dropout rates (Mohanty et al., 2009). Inclusion, thus, is not a privilege—it's a right.

2.3 Core Principles of Inclusive Education

1. **Equity over Equality**
   - Equality gives every child the same desk.
   - Equity gives a wheelchair-using child a ramp, a dyslexic child audiobooks, and a tribal child bilingual textbooks (Ainscow& Miles, 2008).
2. **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**
   - Lessons should cater to diverse needs—teaching math through visuals, storytelling, and hands-on activities (Rose & Meyer, 2002).
3. **No Discrimination**
   - India's "Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)" mandates inclusive education, prohibiting schools from denying admission (GoI, 2016).
4. **Community Participation**
   - Parents, local leaders, and disabled persons' organizations must collaborate to sustain inclusion (Singal, 2019).

As Loreman et al. (2005) argue, inclusive education is a social justice imperative, not charity. It's about designing a system where every child, whether they have a disability, speak a minority language, or come from a slum, can say, "This school is for me."

III. Historical Context of Inclusive Education in India

India's journey toward inclusive education is a tale of breaking down walls, where children once sidelined by disability began to claim their rightful place in classrooms. For too long, exclusion shaped the educational landscape for persons with disabilities (PWDs), but through decades of evolving policies and growing awareness, the nation has started to weave a vision where every child belongs.

3.1 Education Prior to Inclusion

Before the 1990s, education for children with disabilities was primarily segregated, taking place in special schools operated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and religious groups. The roots of special education in India can be traced back to the colonial era, with the establishment of the first school for the deaf in Bombay in 1884 by a Roman Catholic Mission and

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the first school for the blind in Amritsar in 1887 by Annie Sharp, a British Christian missionary (Mukhopadhyay& Mani, 2002). These early institutions, often motivated by missionary zeal and inspired by Western models of charity, served only a tiny fraction—about 0.1%—of the disabled child population (Jangira, 1995). By 1947, when India gained independence, the country had only 32 schools for the blind, 30 for the deaf, and 3 for those with intellectual disabilities, demonstrating the limited reach of special education at that time (NCERT, 2006).

The number of such schools grew significantly to approximately 3,000 by the year 2000, but their urban-centric nature left rural disabled children largely unserved, exacerbating regional disparities (NCERT, 2006; Singal, 2016).

These special schools operated within a medical model of disability, viewing disability as a defect requiring correction or institutional care, which reinforced social isolation and stigmatization (Mitra, 2006). This approach was rooted in colonial legacies that prioritized charity over systemic inclusion, with little emphasis on integrating disabled individuals into mainstream society (Grech, S., &Soldatic, K., 2015). Mainstream schools, meanwhile, were inaccessible, lacking infrastructure such as ramps, accessible toilets, or trained teachers capable of addressing diverse learning needs (NSSO, 2002). Socio-cultural barriers further compounded exclusion, as disability was often perceived through a lens of *"Karma"* or familial shame, discouraging parents from enrolling disabled children, particularly girls (Ghai, 2002). Girls with disabilities faced triple the dropout rates of boys due to intersecting gender and disability discrimination (NSSO, 2002).

The absence of trained special educators was a critical bottleneck, as teacher training programs for disability-specific pedagogy were scarce and lacked standardized curricula (Jangira, 1995). For instance, while the Government of India introduced schemes in the 1960s to train teachers for children with visual impairments, these efforts were hampered by inconsistent syllabi and a shortage of qualified teacher educators (Mukhopadhyay& Mani, 2002). Moreover, special schools, while providing some education, often focused on basic literacy or vocational skills, limiting opportunities for higher education or social integration (Singal, 2016).

The 1960s marked a nascent recognition of inclusive principles, with the Kothari Commission (1964–1966) advocating for the education of children with disabilities in regular schools to promote social integration (Alur, 2002). This recommendation was ground-breaking, aligning with emerging global discourses on equality and education as a right. However, it remained largely aspirational due to the absence of structured programs, funding, or political will to implement systemic changes. The commission's vision highlighted the need for a shift from segregation to integration, but mainstream schools continued to exclude disabled children, citing unpreparedness or resource constraints (Ghai, 2002). This period laid the ideological groundwork for later inclusive education policies, but tangible progress awaited the legislative and programmatic developments of the 1970s and beyond.

3.2 Inception of Inclusive Education

The inception of inclusive education in India marked a pivotal shift from segregated special education to policies fostering integration and meaningful participation in mainstream schools, driven by national and global influences. The "Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme", launched in 1974, represented India's first formal attempt at mainstreaming. A centrally sponsored initiative, IEDC provided aids, appliances, transport allowances, and financial support for disabled students in regular schools, aiming to facilitate their retention and academic achievement (Mukhopadhyay& Mani, 2002). Despite its progressive intent, IEDC's focus remained on physical placement rather than systemic changes to ensure meaningful participation, aligning with a "medical model of disability" that placed the burden of adaptation on the child (Ainscow, 2005). Its reach was limited, covering only about 100,000 children by the 1980s, due to inadequate teacher training, lack of accessible infrastructure, and insufficient funding (Alur, 2002). Nevertheless, IEDC played a crucial role in raising awareness about the need for integration, setting the stage for subsequent programs.

In the 1980s, the Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (PIED) was launched in 1987 with support from UNICEF and the Ministry of Human Resource Development. This initiative introduced a more systematic approach to education for disabled children. PIED adopted a composite area strategy, focusing on clusters of schools instead of individual institutions. In its initial phase, the program was implemented in seven states: Assam, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, covering 42 districts. It later expanded to include additional districts and

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eight more states—Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan—in Phases II and III, which took place from 1996 to 1998 (NCERT, 2006).

PIED emphasized teacher training, community mobilization, and resource support, leading to increased enrollment of both mildly and severely disabled children, with orthopedically impaired students showing particularly high participation (MHRD, 2001). The program also improved teacher attitudes and parental acceptance, fostering a cultural shift toward inclusion (Singal, 2016). For instance, PIED's cluster-based approach ensured higher retention rates among disabled students compared to non-disabled peers, with lower absenteeism reported in project areas (Mukhopadhyay& Mani, 2002).

The 1990s marked a paradigm shift, catalyzed by global and domestic developments. Globally, "the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994)" established inclusive education as a fundamental human right, advocating for schools to accommodate all children regardless of their abilities. India, as a signatory, aligned its policies with this framework, influencing subsequent reforms. Domestically, the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, was a landmark legislation that mandated free education for children with disabilities up to age 18 in appropriate environments. The Act emphasized infrastructural modifications (e.g., ramps, accessible classrooms), curriculum restructuring (e.g., modified examinations for visually impaired students), provision of aids and appliances, and grievance redressal mechanisms to ensure equitable access (PWD Act, 1995). This legislation shifted the discourse from charity-based education to a rights-based approach, laying a legal foundation for inclusion (Kalyanpur, 2008).

The "District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)" was launched in 1994, formally incorporated the philosophy of inclusive education by 1997, further advancing this shift. Funded partly by international agencies such as the World Bank, DPEP operated in 18 states, covering 2,014 blocks by the early 2000s, and explicitly addressed barriers to participation through child-centred pedagogy (Sanjeev& Kumar, 2007). Influenced by PIED's success and the Salamanca Statement, DPEP conducted comprehensive surveys and assessment camps to identify children with special needs, provided in-service teacher training, supplied educational aids, and removed architectural barriers (MHRD, 2001). The Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IED) guidelines stated that "DPEP will fund interventions for IED of primary school-going children with integrable and mild to moderate disabilities," supporting early detection, community mobilization, and resource support (Sanjeev& Kumar, 2007, p. 12).

These foundational work paved the way for more ambitious programs like SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001, which dramatically scaled up inclusive education by enrolling 2.1 million disabled children by 2010 (Government of India, 2001). SSA provided aids, appliances, braille books, and therapeutic services, but critics noted its emphasis on quantitative enrollment metrics often overshadowed qualitative inclusion, such as peer interaction and academic outcomes (Ainscow, 2005; Kalyanpur, 2008). The Rehabilitation Council of India Act, enacted in 1992, bolstered initiatives for inclusive education by requiring the presence of qualified special educators to address the ongoing shortage of trained teachers (Government of India, 1992). These important developments ultimately laid the groundwork for the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. This legislation legally mandated inclusive education throughout India's school system, reinforcing the right of every child, including those with disabilities, to receive quality education in mainstream settings (Government of India, 2009). Despite these advances, challenges such as resource constraints, societal attitudes, and disparities in rural access continued to hinder full inclusion (Singal, 2016).

3.3 Literacy and Living Standards prior to Inclusive Education

The legacy of systemic exclusion in education for persons with disabilities in India had profound and far-reaching consequences, perpetuating cycles of poverty, unemployment, and social marginalization. The 2001 Census revealed a stark literacy gap, with a literacy rate of 49.3% for persons with disabilities compared to 65.38% for the general population (Census of India, 2001). This disparity was particularly pronounced among disabled women, who achieved a literacy rate of just 36.2%, reflecting the compounded effects of gender and disability discrimination (Census of India, 2001). These figures underscore the limited access to education for disabled individuals, particularly in rural areas, where over 70% of India's disabled population resided, yet educational infrastructure was scarce (NSSO, 2002).

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Economic disparities were equally severe. The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO, 2002) reported that only 25% of disabled adults aged 15–64 were employed, indicating a high level of unemployment or exclusion from the labor force (NSSO, 2002). This low employment rate was driven by limited educational attainment, lack of vocational training, and workplace discrimination, which restricted access to stable livelihoods (Mitra&Sambamoorthi, 2008). The World Bank (2007) highlighted that disabled individuals were significantly more likely to live below the poverty line, with households containing disabled members facing a 19.1% higher risk of poverty due to additional healthcare costs and reduced earning potential (World Bank, 2007; Yadav et al., 2023). These outcomes align with Sen's (1999) capability framework, which posits that educational exclusion deprives individuals of the capabilities needed for social and economic participation, trapping them in cycles of poverty and dependency. The lack of education not only limited literacy but also curtailed opportunities for skill development, social integration, and self-reliance, reinforcing systemic deprivation (Mitra, 2006).

The predominance of special schools, which numbered over 3,000 by the year 2000, did little to address these disparities (NCERT, 2000). As noted in NCERT's 2006 report, these institutions were predominantly urban, creating significant access barriers for rural children with disabilities, who constituted the majority of the disabled population (NCERT, 2006). Special schools, often grounded in a medical model of disability, focused on basic literacy or vocational skills, limiting pathways to higher education or mainstream employment (Singal, 2019). Moreover, their high costs and geographic concentration excluded low-income families, with less than 5% of disabled children accessing any form of schooling in the 1980s and 1990s (Alur, 2002). Societal stigma further exacerbated exclusion, as disability was often viewed through 'cultural lenses of shame or divine punishment', discouraging families from seeking education for disabled children, particularly girls (Ghai, 2002). For instance, disabled girls faced not only educational barriers but also social isolation, with many confined to domestic roles due to patriarchal norms (Thomas, 2005).

Legislative commitments provided a framework for change but were slow to bridge these gaps. The "Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992" mandated the training and certification of special educators, addressing the chronic shortage of qualified teachers (Government of India, 1992). However, by 2000, only a fraction of teachers in mainstream schools had received disability-specific training, limiting the effectiveness of early inclusion efforts (Jangira, 1995). The "Constitution (86th Amendment) Act, 2002, which mandated free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14", including those with disabilities, marked a significant step toward universal education (Government of India, 2002). Yet, implementation challenges persisted, with gaps in accessible infrastructure (e.g., ramps, braille materials), insufficient funding, and entrenched societal attitudes hindering equitable access (Kalyanpur, 2008). For example, a 2003 survey by the World Bank found that only 10% of schools in India had basic accessibility features, underscoring the physical barriers to inclusion (World Bank, 2007).

The socio-economic consequences of this exclusion were starkly evident in health and living standards. Disabled individuals faced higher rates of multidimensional poverty, including poor nutrition, inadequate housing, and limited healthcare access, with 60% of disabled households reporting unmet medical needs due to financial constraints (Yadav et al., 2023). These disparities were particularly acute in rural areas, where poverty rates among disabled populations were estimated to be 30% higher than among non-disabled peers (World Bank, 2007). The interplay of low literacy, unemployment, and poverty created a vicious cycle, where disabled individuals were denied the agency to participate fully in society, as articulated by Sen's (1999) emphasis on capabilities as freedom. This systemic deprivation highlighted the urgent need for inclusive education policies that went beyond access to foster holistic development and social inclusion.

IV. Policy Framework for Inclusive Education

India's commitment to inclusive education is reflected in a robust framework of national policies, legislation, international commitments, and government schemes. These efforts aim to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to quality education in mainstream settings. Despite significant progress, challenges in implementation persist, underscoring the need for continued focus on bridging policy gaps and enhancing on-ground execution. This section provides a detailed examination of the key components of India's inclusive education framework.

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4.1 National Policies and Legislation

Early Foundations:

- **The Kothari Commission (1964-66)**: Also known as "the Indian Education Commission", was the first official body to emphasise the education of children with disabilities, advocating for their inclusion beyond humanitarian motives. It highlighted that education enables disabled children to overcome impairments, contributing as productive citizens, aligning with social justice principles (Kothari Commission, 1966; Singal, 2019). The commission underscored the importance of inclusion, arguing that children with and without disabilities should learn together to foster mutual understanding and social unity (Jha, 2007). This approach reinforced the idea that persons with disabilities are an inseparable part of the general education system (Alur, 2002).
- **National Policy on Education (NPE-1968):** The National Policy on Education (NPE-1968), which was influenced by the Kothari Commission (1964-66), marked a significant step toward education for children with disabilities. It advocated for a common schooling system to promote national integration, ensuring equitable access for disabled students in mainstream schools (Government of India, 1968). The policy emphasized expanding educational facilities for physically and intellectually disabled children and developing integrated programs to enable their participation alongside peers (Naik, 1975). By prioritizing social cohesion, NPE-1968 laid the groundwork for subsequent inclusive education initiatives like the IEDC-1974 (Singal, 2010).
- **Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC-1974):** Launched in 1974 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Employment, the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme promotes education for children with mild to moderate disabilities in mainstream schools. Fully centrally funded, it supports resource centers, disability assessments, tailored educational materials, parent counseling, transportation subsidies, and teacher training to foster inclusive environments (Sharma & Das, 2015). By emphasizing accessibility and holistic development, IEDC empowers students with diverse disabilities to thrive academically and socially.
- **National Policy on Education (1986)**: The "National Policy on Education (NPE-1986)" emphasized equality, explicitly addressing the education of children with disabilities in Section 4.9. It used the term "integrated education" to promote their inclusion in mainstream schools alongside peers whenever feasible, aiming to prepare them for equal participation in society (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986). The policy advocated for special schools for severely disabled children, vocational training, reoriented teacher training, and encouraged voluntary efforts to support their education, laying a foundation for later inclusive policies (Sharma & Das, 2015).
- **The 1992 Programme of Action (POA)**: The Programme of Action (POA) built upon the National Policy on Education from 1986 and promoted integrated education through the Pragmatic Placement Principle. It emphasized that children with disabilities who are capable of learning in general schools should be educated in those settings rather than in special schools. Additionally, students in special schools should transition to general schools once they have acquired essential skills such as daily living, communication, and basic academics (MHRD, Programme of Action, 1992).
- **Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) 1992**: In September 1992, the Indian Parliament enacted the RCI Act, which was later amended in 2000. This act requires the registration of special educators by the council to ensure that every child with disabilities receives instruction from a trained professional. It also established penalties for educators who work with special needs students without a license (Sanjeev, 2007). The RCI provides various rehabilitation services and focuses on developing the skill sets of personnel and professionals involved in special education and rehabilitation, thereby enhancing the quality of care provided (Ray &Ghanta, 2022; Sanjeev, 2007).

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Expanding Inclusion:

- **The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, 1994):** The DPEP, launched in 1994, aimed to universalize primary education in India, focusing on access and equity for all, including children with disabilities. It facilitated their enrolment in mainstream primary schools through resource centres, removal of architectural barriers, capacity building training, community mobilization, early identification, and the provision of institutional grants and instruments (Sanjeev, 2007).
- **PWD Act 1995**: The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 (PWD-1995), enacted by the Indian Parliament, was a pivotal law for disability rights. It guaranteed free education in an appropriate setting for children with disabilities up to age 18, aiming to eliminate discrimination and ensure their equal participation (Ray &Ghanta, 2022). This comprehensive act covered seven disabilities: blindness, low vision, hearing impairment, locomotor impairment, mental retardation, leprosy-cured, and mental illness. The legislation mandated government responsibility for upholding their rights and promoting the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools. Furthermore, it focused on promoting special schools with vocational training facilities and ensuring better social security, economic opportunities, healthcare services, and skill training programs for all children with disabilities (PWD Act, 1995).
- **The National Trust Act (NTA, 1999)**: NTA established the National Trust for the Welfare of individuals with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disability. The goal of this historic law is to uphold and secure the rights of those who, due to their disabilities, have been more marginalised than others. For the group of individuals it was intended, to be the first of its sort. It acknowledged the variety of independence in daily life, abilities, and money management. It is the main decision-making body for people with disabilities and strives to manage the trust's properties in addition to offering complete care to those who have cerebral palsy and mental retardation (Sanjeev& Kumar, 2007).
- **National Curriculum Framework (NCF2005)**: The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) emphasizes schools as centres for preparing all students, including those differently-abled or from marginalized sections, for the future (DSEL, 2024). It advocates for acknowledging every child's unique qualities and providing equal opportunities. Recognizing that many children do not fit a single norm, NCF 2005 supports inclusive education where diverse learners enrich the classroom environment, making it more inspiring when students from varying backgrounds learn together (Sanjeev& Kumar, 2007)..
- **National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD, 2006):** The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in India acknowledges their value as human resources and aims to foster an inclusive environment ensuring equal opportunities, rights protection, and full societal participation, aligning with constitutional principles of equality, freedom, justice, and dignity (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2006). It emphasizes enhancing quality of life through equal opportunities and access to rehabilitation. Key features include: (i) Physical rehabilitation, encompassing early detection, medical interventions, and professional development; (ii) Educational rehabilitation, including vocational training; and (iii) Economic rehabilitation for dignified societal integration (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2006).

Legislative Milestones:

- **Right to Education Act (2009)**: The "Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, ensures free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14", explicitly including those with disabilities (Government of India, 2010). Stemming from the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002) adding Article 21A, it mandates inclusive, non-discriminatory education environments, requiring accommodations for children with special needs (Ministry of Law and

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Justice, 2009; Ray &Ghanta, 2022). Section 2(d) (2010 amendment) classifies children with disabilities as a disadvantaged group, with Section 12(1)(c) mandating 25% reservation in private schools. Challenges like inadequate infrastructure and teacher training hinder inclusivity, demanding stronger enforcement (Vigneshwaran, 2023; Ghosh, 2013).

- **RPWD 2016**: The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 is a significant piece of legislation that broadened the definition of disabilities to include 21 conditions, such as autism, muscular dystrophy, and specific learning disabilities. The Act guarantees the right to free education for children with benchmark disabilities (defined as having at least 40% of a specified disability) up to the age of 18, whether in neighborhood schools or special institutions. Furthermore, it mandates the provision of reasonable accommodations, the creation of accessible environments, and the prohibition of discrimination, thereby greatly enhancing the legal framework for inclusive education (Dey&Bika, 2023; Ray &Ghanta, 2022).

Recent Policy Developments:

- **National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) and National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE, 2023)**: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes that "Education is the primary significant tool for acquiring equality and justice", fostering an inclusive society (Government of India, 2020). Its provisions are operationalized through the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE, 2023), which addresses facilities, resources, and barriers for Children with Special Needs (CWSN). The policy includes a dedicated chapter on equitable and inclusive education, outlining strategies to eliminate disparities in access and participation (NCERT, 2023).

  NEP 2020 mandates support services, teacher training, and inclusive curricula tailored to diverse learners, including assistive technologies and digital resources for students with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2020). It advocates technology integration, such as e-content in regional languages and accessible digital infrastructure, to enhance learning for marginalized groups, including those in remote areas.

  Additionally, NEP 2020 integrates disability considerations across its framework, classifying Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)—encompassing gender identities and children with disabilities—to ensure targeted interventions (DSEL, 2024). By aligning policy with practical implementation through NCF-SE, India aims to create an inclusive, barrier-free education system for all learners.

Constitutional Provisions:

- **Constitutional Provisions**: Article 21A grants the right to education, Article 38 mandates state policy to minimize inequality, and Article 46 calls for promotion of educational and economic interests of marginalized sections, including PwDs (Constitution of India, 1950). These Articles provide the constitutional basis for all inclusive education policies.

4.2 International Commitments

- **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD):** India ratified the UNCRPD in 2007, committing to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities, including their right to education. The convention emphasizes inclusive education as a fundamental means to achieve social inclusion, participation, and non-discrimination. It calls for reasonable accommodations and accessible learning environments, influencing India's domestic policies like the RPWD Act (UNCRPD, 2006).
- **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4):** As part of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, SDG4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. India, as a signatory, is committed to achieving this goal, which includes specific targets for eliminating disparities in education and ensuring access for children with disabilities. SDG4 guides India's efforts to strengthen its inclusive education framework and monitor progress

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toward universal education (UN, 2015). These international commitments provide a global benchmark for India's policies, encouraging the adoption of best practices and fostering accountability in achieving inclusive education goals. India's initiatives like SamagraShiksha reflect its commitment to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education" by 2030 (UNESCO, 2015).

- **UNICEF Collaboration:** Supported programs like SSA and Accessible India Campaign to address infrastructure and social barriers (World Bank, 2004).

4.3 Government Schemes and Initiatives

- **Project Integrated Education for Disabled (PIED, 1987)**: In 1987, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), in collaboration with UNICEF and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), introduced the PIED initiative. The aim of this project was to shift from a traditional school-based approach to a more inclusive composite area approach. Under this new model, all schools within the designated project area were expected to accept all students with disabilities, rather than relying on a single school to do so. Additionally, the project included provisions for training teachers to better support students with disabilities (Sanjeev, 2007).

- **SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA):**SarvaShikshaAbhiyan, launched in 2000–2001, is India's flagship program for universalizing elementary education, emphasizing inclusive education for children with disabilities through a zero-rejection policy. This ensures quality education regardless of disability type or severity. SSA supports early identification, teacher training, provision of aids, removal of architectural barriers, and individualized education plans (IEPs) (Dey&Bika, 2023). It also promotes community mobilization, peer sensitization, and research to enhance inclusion. SSA aims to ensure access, retention, and quality education for all children, including those with disabilities, in mainstream schools.

- **RashtriyaMadhyamikShikshaAbhiyan (RMSA- 2009):** The RashtriyaMadhyamikShikshaAbhiyan (RMSA), launched in March 2009, aims to enhance access to and improve the quality of secondary education. Its primary objective is to increase student enrolment in secondary schools within commuting distance, targeting 100% enrolment by 2017 and universal retention by 2020. RMSA focuses on inclusive education, ensuring equitable access for all, including marginalized groups, through infrastructure development, teacher training, and curriculum enhancement (Ray &Ghanta, 2022).

- **Inclusive Education for Disabled Students at the Secondary Level (IEDSS, 2009):** Launched in the 2009-10 academic year, this centrally financed initiative replaced the previous Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) project. Its main aim is to support the inclusion of disabled students in secondary schools. The key objectives include identifying children with disabilities at the school level, providing them with appropriate learning materials, removing infrastructural barriers in schools, and offering basic training for all secondary school teachers to facilitate inclusion.

- **SamagraShikshaAbhiyan:** The SamagraShikshaAbhiyan (SSA), launched in 2018, is a centrally supported program by the Ministry of Education that covers education from pre-primary to senior secondary levels. This initiative integrates three previously independent programs: SarvaShikshaAbhiyan, RashtriyaMadhyamikShikshaAbhiyan, and Teacher Education. It aims to promote equity and inclusion while ensuring universal access to education.

  For children with special needs (CWSN), SSA provides early disability detection through block-level camps, orientation programs, treatment services, activity-based events, and capacity-building for special educators. The program offers tailored support, including funding for escorts, scribes, assistive devices, teaching-learning materials, and remuneration, with particular emphasis on supporting girls with special needs (Dept. of School Education Learning, 2024).

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- **Accessible India Campaign**: The Accessible India Campaign, launched in 2015, aims to make public spaces, transportation, and information and communication systems accessible to persons with disabilities. In the context of education, the campaign supports the creation of barrier-free school environments, ensuring that children with disabilities can access educational facilities. By improving physical and digital accessibility, the campaign facilitates broader inclusion in educational and social settings (Accessible India Campaign, 2015).
- **PM SHRI Schools (2022)**: The PM SHRI (PM Schools for Rising India) Scheme, launched on September 7, 2022, aims to upgrade over 14,500 schools into exemplar institutions showcasing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. With a budget of ₹27,360 crore (2022–2027), it strengthens existing schools managed by Central/State/UT governments or local bodies, including KVS and NVS. PM SHRI Schools promote inclusive, equitable education for children with special needs (CWSN) through barrier-free infrastructure, assistive technologies, and inclusive curricula. Selected via a competitive Challenge Mode, these schools emphasize holistic development, modern facilities, and mentorship for nearby schools, benefiting over 20 lakh students (Dept. of School Education & Literacy, 2024).

5. Current Status of Inclusive Education in India

India's inclusive education system, underpinned by the Right of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, reflects a commitment to equitable access for children with special needs (CWSN), yet faces significant regional disparities and implementation challenges. Approximately 2,266,794 CWSN were enrolled from pre-primary to Class XII in 2021–22, a 3.45% increase from 2020–21, marking progress from the early 2000s when enrollment of children with disabilities (aged 5–19) was below 40% (Ministry of Education, 2022; Census of India, 2011). The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2021–22 reports that 71.8% of schools have ramps, 49.7% have ramps with handrails, and 27.0% have CWSN-friendly toilets, revealing substantial infrastructure gaps (Ministry of Education, 2022). The Right to Education (RTE) Act's 25% reservation in private schools has facilitated access for over 450,000 CWSN, while NEP 2020's flexible curricula, such as oral exams for students with dyslexia, enhance accessibility (NCERT, 2023).

Kerala leads in inclusive education, leveraging decentralized governance and community programs like Kudumbashree to enhance school accessibility and teacher training (Kerala Education Department, 2021). Of its 16,240 schools, 78.1% have ramps, 60.9% have handrails, and 25.5% have CWSN-friendly toilets, surpassing national averages, with 95% of identified CWSN enrolled in mainstream schools (Ministry of Education, 2022). Delhi achieves 100% coverage across all accessibility indicators (5,619 schools), reflecting urban policy prioritization, while Maharashtra (92.7% ramps, 78.9% handrails, 52.7% CWSN toilets) and Punjab (89.7% ramps, 85.1% handrails) also perform strongly due to robust state initiatives (Ministry of Education, 2022).

In contrast, northeastern states like Nagaland (37.9% ramps, 16.4% handrails, 5.4% CWSN toilets) and Meghalaya (30.4% ramps, 21.2% handrails, 2.6% CWSN toilets) rank among the lowest, constrained by geographical challenges and resource shortages (Ministry of Education, 2022). Bihar faces severe infrastructure deficits, with only 37.5% of its 93,165 schools having ramps with handrails and 14.4% with CWSN-friendly toilets, alongside 18% with functional computers, limiting digital inclusion (Ministry of Education, 2024). Socio-cultural stigma, particularly in rural areas, further restricts CWSN participation across these regions, with attitudinal barriers among parents and communities impeding inclusion.

V. Literacy and Living Standards Post-Inclusion Reform

India's inclusive education initiatives have brought modest progress to the literacy and living standards of persons with disabilities (PwD), though significant challenges and disparities remain across socio-economic, gender, and geographic lines. The literacy rate for PwD has shown incremental improvement, rising from 49.3% in 2001 to 54.5% in 2011, before dipping slightly to 52.2% by 2020 due to disruptions from COVID-19 (Census of India, 2001, 2011; NSSO, 2020). In comparison, the 2011 literacy rate for the general population was 74%, underscoring a persistent gap (Office of the

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Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). During the pandemic, 67% of students with disabilities lacked access to digital learning platforms, further widening educational inequities (UNICEF, 2021).

The benefits of inclusive education extend beyond literacy to living standards. Adults with disabilities who attended inclusive schools are more likely to secure formal employment compared to those from segregated or non-inclusive settings, highlighting the role of integrated education in fostering economic independence (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, integrated Anganwadicenters have reduced malnutrition among children with disabilities, contributing to improved health outcomes (NITI Aayog, 2023). However, economic burdens persist, as households with disabled members allocate 25% of their income to healthcare, limiting investments in education (Mitra&Sambamoorthi, 2021).

Gender disparities further complicate progress, with only 42% of women with disabilities being literate compared to 58% of men, a gap driven by factors such as early marriages (NSSO, 2020). These statistics reflect that while inclusive education has laid a foundation for improved literacy and living standards, systemic barriers—ranging from inadequate infrastructure to socio-economic constraints—continue to hinder equitable outcomes for PwD in India.

VI. Initiatives for Inclusive and Accessible Education in India

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has spearheaded multiple initiatives to promote inclusive and accessible education in India, particularly for students from Socially and Educationally Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), as emphasized in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. These efforts aim to address diverse educational needs through flexible content delivery, universal design for learning (UDL) principles, and resources tailored for students with disabilities, aligning with policies like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016, the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, and Sustainable Development Goal 4. Key programs include:

- **ePathshala**: A mobile app and portal launched by the Ministry of Education provides free access to NCERT textbooks and e-content for students, teachers, and parents. It offers textbooks for Classes 1 to 12 in Urdu, Hindi, and English, available in downloadable chapter-wise PDF format. The platform also includes specialized materials for educators and parents, enhancing accessibility and supporting inclusive education.
- **PRASHAST - A Disability Screening Checklist for Schools**: PRASHAST is a booklet and mobile app designed to screen for 21 disabilities, including benchmark disabilities outlined in the RPwD Act 2016. This tool facilitates early identification and certification of children with disabilities, supporting inclusive education goals under NEP 2020, RPwD Act 2016, RTE Act 2009, and SDG 4. It promotes early intervention and equitable access to education.
- **Barkhaa_UDL Based Reading Series for 'All'**: The Barkhaa series is a supplementary graded reading program for Classes I and II, designed to foster early reading skills. Comprising 40 stories across four levels and five themes (Relationships, Birds-Animals, Musical Instruments, Games and Toys, Around Us, and Food), it encourages meaningful reading and engagement. Available in digital format, it adheres to UDL principles to ensure accessibility for diverse learners.
- **Teaching Learning Resources in Indian Sign Language**: NCERT has developed teaching and learning resources in Indian Sign Language (ISL) to include students with hearing impairments in mainstream education. These resources, updated regularly and based on UDL principles, provide accessible content for hearing-impaired students, fostering inclusivity and equal learning opportunities.
- **Accessibility Concerns in NCERT Textbooks**: NCERT textbooks integrate inclusion and accessibility across all school stages and subjects in a natural and comprehensive manner. Detailed resources on how accessibility is embedded in these textbooks are available, ensuring that educational materials cater to students with diverse needs, including those with disabilities.
- **Audio Books**: Audio versions of NCERT textbooks, enriched with drama, animal sounds, and picture descriptions, enhance accessibility for children with visual impairments (CWVU). These resources support anytime, anywhere learning,

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making education more inclusive for students with visual challenges.

- **Priya - The Accessibility Warrior: The comic book Priya:** The Accessibility Warrior, available on DIKSHA, ePathshala, and the NCERT website, narrates the story of a girl facing accessibility challenges after an accident. It includes embedded ISL videos and audio in flipbook, PDF, and ePub formats, raising awareness about accessibility and promoting inclusive education.
- **BhashaSangam**: BhashaSangam promotes communication in 22 scheduled Indian languages and ISL through a mobile app compatible with iOS and Android. Offering over 100 sentences across various themes, the app enables users to learn basic conversations, test their skills, and earn online certificates, fostering linguistic and cultural inclusion.
- **Teachers Support Material on Inclusive Education**: NCERT provides handbooks and manuals for teachers on inclusive education, offering guidelines to address the special needs of students in inclusive classrooms. These resources emphasize the quality of student experiences and achievement, guiding educators to create equitable learning environments.
- **PMeVidya**: PMeVidya leverages information and communication technology (ICT) to sustain education, featuring 12 direct-to-home (DTH) channels (one per class), community radio stations, and content tailored for children with special needs. It uses multiple streaming platforms to deliver audio and video educational content, ensuring continuous access to learning.
- **DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing)**: DIKSHA is a state-of-the-art digital platform built on open-source technology, hosting curriculum content and supporting continuous professional development for educators. It serves as a comprehensive resource hub, making educational materials accessible to all learners.
- **SWAYAM MOOCs**: SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) offers free, interactive online courses prepared by over 1,000 faculty members across India. These courses include video lectures, downloadable reading materials, self-assessment tests, and discussion forums, aiming to bridge the digital divide and enhance educational access.
- **NISHTHA**: National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA) is the world's largest teacher training program, launched to improve learning outcomes at the elementary level. It provides standardized training modules for teachers and school principals across India, focusing on holistic education and critical thinking skills.
- **Augmented Reality / Virtual Reality**: The e-Pathshala AR App uses augmented reality to enhance textbooks and classroom interactions, encouraging active learning. Aligned with the Digital India vision, this initiative transforms students into active learners by making education more engaging and experimental.
- **Tactile Map Book**: Designed for visually impaired students, the Tactile Map Book includes seven embossed maps with Braille descriptions, covering physical, geopolitical, and environmental aspects of India. Developed with feedback from visually impaired students and organizations, it uses advanced techniques to ensure accessibility.

VII. Conclusion

India's commitment to inclusive education has transformed the educational landscape for children with disabilities, moving from exclusionary special schools to a rights-based model that prioritizes mainstream integration. Policies like the RTE Act, RPWD Act, and NEP 2020, alongside initiatives such as SamagraShiksha and NCERT's accessible resources, have driven progress, evidenced by increased enrollment and literacy rates for persons with disabilities. Yet, the journey remains incomplete. Infrastructure deficits, with less than half of schools equipped with CWSN-friendly toilets, alongside teacher shortages and entrenched societal biases, continue to exclude many children, particularly in rural and northeastern regions. Gender disparities further exacerbate inequities, with disabled women facing lower literacy and employment rates. To realize the vision of inclusive education, India must prioritize closing regional gaps, scaling up teacher training, leveraging technology like ePathshala and DIKSHA, and fostering community-driven attitude shifts. Only

through sustained, collaborative efforts can India ensure that every child, like Priya, not only accesses school but truly belongs, unlocking their potential for a dignified, self-reliant life.

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