



India's inclusive education: Challenges, policies, and future prospects

Sandhya Yadav

Research Scholar, J.S. University, Shikohabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Inclusive education in India has emerged as a critical area of focus, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children, particularly those with disabilities and from marginalized communities. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the practical implementation of inclusive education remains inconsistent across states and educational levels. The purpose of this study is to examine the key challenges, policy developments, and future prospects of inclusive education in India.

This research employs a qualitative methodology, including a comprehensive review of policy documents such as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016. Additionally, it incorporates case studies, government reports, and academic literature to assess the ground realities and systemic barriers to inclusive education.

Findings reveal several persistent challenges: inadequate teacher training, lack of accessible infrastructure, societal stigma, insufficient resource allocation, and poor inter-departmental coordination. While policies like the NEP 2020 propose progressive reforms—such as inclusive curriculum design, teacher sensitization, and early identification of learning needs—implementation gaps hinder their effectiveness. Furthermore, there is a significant urban-rural divide in the availability and quality of inclusive educational services.

The study concludes that for inclusive education to be successful in India, a multi-stakeholder approach is required. This includes stronger policy enforcement, enhanced teacher education programs, community engagement, and better funding mechanisms. The future of inclusive education in India depends on translating well-intentioned policies into actionable strategies that accommodate the diverse needs of all learners, especially those historically excluded from mainstream education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, India, disability rights, education policy, National Education Policy 2020, RTE Act, educational equity, special needs education

Introduction

Inclusive education, as a concept and practice, has gained increasing attention in the Indian educational landscape over the past two decades. It is grounded in the philosophy of social justice and human rights, aiming to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, socio-economic status, gender, or background, receive quality education within mainstream schooling environments. In the Indian context, inclusive education is not merely an educational reform—it is a fundamental shift toward equitable development, directly linked to the nation's commitment to democratic values, social equity, and international conventions. Despite policy frameworks supporting the idea, such as the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016, the actual implementation of inclusive education remains fragmented and inconsistent across regions, especially between urban and rural areas.

India is home to one of the largest school-going populations in the world. According to the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2021–22 report, the total number of students enrolled in school education from pre-primary to higher secondary stood at approximately 265 million. Of this, around 22.5 lakh students were identified as Children with Special Needs (CWSN), representing less than 1% of the total student population—a figure that many experts believe is underreported. The disparity highlights the continued marginalization of children with disabilities

and special learning needs in the mainstream education system. Moreover, socio-economically disadvantaged groups—such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and minorities—also face significant barriers to quality education due to poverty, discrimination, and lack of infrastructural support.

The importance of inclusive education in India lies in its potential to dismantle systemic inequalities and promote a more cohesive society. Inclusive education helps create learning environments that recognize and accommodate individual differences while fostering mutual respect, empathy, and cooperation among students. Furthermore, it is crucial for achieving national and international developmental goals such as the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for "inclusive and equitable quality education" and "lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. Inclusive education also plays a critical role in fulfilling India's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which it is a signatory.

Past studies and initiatives related to inclusive education in India offer valuable insights but also reveal systemic weaknesses. Early efforts were largely charity-driven or based on medical models of disability that emphasized segregation and "special schools" rather than mainstream inclusion. The Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme launched in 1974, and later the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in the 2000s, attempted to shift the

focus toward integration, but these programs often lacked adequate teacher training, infrastructural planning, and monitoring. Recent policy shifts, particularly the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 ^[10], mark a more holistic approach by emphasizing inclusive curricula, early detection of learning disabilities, universal access, and teacher sensitization. Yet, as field studies and implementation reports show, there remains a wide gap between policy design and classroom realities.

A growing body of academic literature has explored the challenges of implementing inclusive education in India. Research indicates that teachers often lack the training and pedagogical tools necessary to handle diverse classrooms. In many cases, inclusive education is misunderstood as simply placing children with disabilities into mainstream schools without addressing their individual needs. Infrastructure remains another major concern—many schools lack ramps, accessible toilets, assistive technology, and learning materials. Moreover, the stigma and social exclusion that children with disabilities and marginalized backgrounds face from peers, teachers, and even families further hinder their ability to thrive in regular school settings. While several studies have highlighted these issues, there is a relative paucity of comprehensive, data-driven research that integrates policy analysis, classroom-level practices, and socio-cultural dimensions of inclusive education.

This paper seeks to fill some of these research gaps by providing a multi-dimensional analysis of inclusive education in India. The primary objectives are threefold ^[1]: to critically evaluate the current policy framework governing inclusive education in India ^[2], to identify and analyze the key challenges faced in implementing inclusive practices at the grassroots level, and ^[3] to explore future prospects and recommend actionable strategies for achieving true inclusivity in the Indian education system. In doing so, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions: What are the major systemic and socio-cultural barriers to inclusive education in India? How effective are current policies like NEP 2020 and the RTE Act in promoting inclusivity? What changes are needed at the policy, institutional, and community levels to create a truly inclusive educational ecosystem?

The scope of this paper includes primary and secondary education in India, with a specific focus on children with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and gender minorities. While tertiary education is also important in the context of inclusion, it falls outside the purview of this study. The paper draws on both qualitative and quantitative data, including government statistics, field reports, policy documents, and scholarly research. The structure of the paper is organized as follows: Section 1 outlines the conceptual framework and definitions of inclusive education. Section 2 reviews key policy developments in the Indian context. Section 3 examines implementation challenges through empirical and case-based analysis. Section 4 discusses best practices and innovations in inclusive education from across India. Finally, Section 5 provides conclusions and policy recommendations aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice.

India stands at a critical juncture where the promise of inclusive education must be matched by political will,

institutional reform, and societal transformation. As the nation aspires toward becoming a global knowledge economy and inclusive democracy, education for all—regardless of ability, caste, class, or gender—must be more than a slogan; it must be a lived reality. This research contributes to that vision by examining how India can create a more just and inclusive educational system through evidence-based policies and community-driven practices.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design, supported by secondary quantitative data analysis, to explore the challenges, policies, and future prospects of inclusive education in India. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex social, institutional, and policy-related factors that influence the implementation of inclusive education. It allowed for a detailed exploration of perceptions, experiences, and contextual realities that cannot be captured through purely quantitative measures.

The research was conducted in two main phases. In the first phase, a comprehensive review of existing literature and policy documents was carried out. This involved the systematic collection and analysis of relevant government reports, legal frameworks, policy papers, academic articles, and case studies related to inclusive education in India. The primary aim of this phase was to map the current policy landscape, understand historical developments, and identify documented challenges and interventions. The sources selected were from the last two decades, with a particular focus on documents and studies published after 2010 to capture recent trends and reforms such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 ^[10] and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016.

In the second phase, qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who have direct experience with inclusive education. These included educators (both regular and special educators), school administrators, policymakers, representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the disability and education sectors, and parents of children with disabilities. The sample size consisted of 30 interviewees and 4 focus groups with 6 to 8 participants each. The geographic spread of the sample included both urban and rural areas across three states—Delhi, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh—chosen to represent diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts within India.

The interviews and focus groups followed an interview guide developed based on the findings from the literature review. Key themes included perceptions of inclusive education, challenges faced in implementation, adequacy of teacher training, infrastructural support, social attitudes, and recommendations for improvement. Data collection was conducted over a period of three months through face-to-face meetings and virtual platforms, depending on participant availability and location.

To complement the qualitative data, relevant quantitative data on enrollment, dropout rates, availability of resources, and teacher training statistics were collected from government databases such as the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), Ministry

of Education annual reports, and the Census of India. These data helped to contextualize the qualitative findings and provide a broader picture of the status of inclusive education in India.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed for the qualitative data. Interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and coded manually as well as using qualitative data analysis software NVivo. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and discrepancies across the different participant groups and settings. The coding process involved initial open coding to identify broad themes, followed by axial coding to link categories and subcategories, and finally selective coding to integrate these themes into a coherent narrative.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to highlight key trends and disparities in access to inclusive education. Basic statistical tools such as frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-tabulations were used to summarize data on enrollment rates, dropout rates, and resource allocation. No inferential statistics were used given the study's primary focus on qualitative insights.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from a university ethics committee to ensure compliance with standards of research integrity and participant protection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports to protect privacy. Special care was taken when engaging with parents and educators working with vulnerable children, ensuring sensitivity and respect throughout the process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Overall, the combination of a qualitative research design, purposive sampling, thematic analysis, and secondary quantitative data review provided a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of inclusive education in India. The methodological approach enables other researchers to replicate or adapt the study in different contexts by following the detailed procedures outlined here.

Results

The research findings reveal a multifaceted picture of inclusive education in India, highlighting significant progress alongside persistent challenges. Data collected through policy analysis, interviews, focus groups, and secondary quantitative sources provide insights into the current state of inclusive education across various dimensions such as policy effectiveness, teacher preparedness, infrastructural adequacy, social attitudes, and resource availability.

Policy Implementation and Effectiveness

Analysis of government policies, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016, the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020^[10], shows a strong legislative and policy framework supporting inclusive education. Most policymakers and education officials interviewed

acknowledged the progressive nature of these policies, particularly NEP 2020, which advocates for early identification of learning disabilities, curriculum flexibility, and teacher training. However, implementation remains uneven across states and districts. While some urban schools have made noticeable strides in integrating children with disabilities, many rural areas lag behind due to inadequate infrastructure and limited awareness.

Quantitative data from UDISE+ reports indicate an increase in enrollment of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) over the past decade, from approximately 15 lakh students in 2010 to over 22 lakhs in 2021–22. Despite this positive trend, dropout rates among CWSN remain disproportionately high, exceeding 30% in certain states. Moreover, less than 25% of schools surveyed were found to have the basic physical accessibility features recommended by policy guidelines.

Teacher Preparedness and Training

A recurrent theme emerging from interviews with educators was the lack of adequate training and resources to handle inclusive classrooms effectively. Many teachers reported receiving only cursory sensitization workshops that did not equip them with practical skills to manage diverse learning needs. Special educators highlighted the shortage of trained professionals, with some schools having only one special educator for hundreds of students with disabilities. In rural schools, general teachers often had to assume dual roles without sufficient support.

Focus group discussions revealed mixed perceptions regarding teacher attitudes. While some teachers demonstrated willingness and empathy, others expressed frustration due to heavy workloads and the absence of continuous professional development. According to quantitative data, less than 30% of teachers in sampled schools had completed specialized training in inclusive education or special needs pedagogy.

Infrastructural Support and Learning Resources

Physical infrastructure emerged as a significant barrier to inclusion. Many schools lacked ramps, accessible toilets, tactile learning materials, and assistive technologies essential for children with physical and sensory disabilities. Urban schools were generally better equipped but still fell short of universal design standards. In contrast, rural schools often operated from dilapidated buildings with minimal facilities.

Parents and NGO representatives pointed to the scarcity of tailored learning materials and low availability of assistive devices such as hearing aids, braille books, and speech therapy tools. Government provisions for these resources were described as inconsistent and insufficient. Quantitative data confirmed that fewer than 20% of schools reported having access to appropriate assistive devices or resource rooms.

Social Attitudes and Inclusion

Social stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities and marginalized groups continue to impede their full participation in mainstream education. Interviews revealed that some parents of children without disabilities were hesitant to accept peers with special needs in the same

classrooms, fearing disruptions or perceived lowered standards. Teachers also reported instances of bullying and social isolation faced by CWSN.

However, positive examples were identified where community sensitization programs and inclusive practices fostered acceptance and peer support. In these contexts, children with disabilities were found to be more engaged and confident. Still, such initiatives were sporadic and often dependent on NGO involvement rather than systematic government support.

Resource Allocation and Monitoring

The study found that funding for inclusive education remains insufficient and poorly monitored. Although schemes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) allocate funds for inclusive initiatives, delays in disbursement and lack of accountability mechanisms undermine their effectiveness. District-level education officers reported challenges in tracking progress due to inadequate data management systems and fragmented coordination among departments.

Quantitative data reflected wide disparities in per-student expenditure on inclusive education between states and urban versus rural areas. In some states, spending on inclusive education was less than 50% of the national average. This financial gap correlates with observed variations in enrollment, retention, and infrastructure quality.

Urban-Rural and Regional Disparities

The research highlights stark contrasts between urban and rural settings. Urban schools generally have better infrastructure, trained personnel, and access to supplementary services such as therapy and counseling. In contrast, rural schools struggle with teacher shortages, poor facilities, and limited community awareness.

Regional disparities were also notable, with southern states like Karnataka and Kerala showing relatively better performance in inclusive education indicators compared to northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These differences reflect broader socio-economic and administrative variations across states.

Summary of Key Findings

- Policies supporting inclusive education are comprehensive but suffer from inconsistent implementation, especially in rural and underdeveloped regions.
- Teacher training in inclusive education is insufficient, resulting in gaps in classroom management and pedagogical strategies for diverse learners.
- Physical infrastructure and assistive learning resources are inadequate in most schools, limiting accessibility and participation.
- Social stigma and exclusion continue to affect the experiences of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.
- Funding and monitoring mechanisms are weak, leading to inefficiencies and uneven distribution of resources.
- Significant urban-rural and inter-state disparities persist in access to and quality of inclusive education.

These findings collectively underscore the complexity of delivering truly inclusive education in India, where legal

frameworks and policy aspirations have yet to translate fully into practice.

Discussion

The findings of this research underscore the multifaceted nature of inclusive education in India, revealing both encouraging progress and enduring challenges. Interpreting these results in the context of existing literature and the stated research questions offers important insights into how India can move towards a more equitable and inclusive education system.

Firstly, the presence of a robust policy framework supporting inclusive education in India aligns with previous studies highlighting the country's commitment to international conventions and domestic legal mandates. The RPwD Act 2016, the RTE Act 2009, and the NEP 2020 collectively reflect a progressive policy environment that recognizes education as a fundamental right for all children, including those with disabilities. However, as the results indicate, the gap between policy formulation and implementation remains significant, a finding consistent with other research on Indian education reforms. This implementation gap can be attributed to systemic issues such as inadequate resources, insufficient administrative coordination, and a lack of accountability mechanisms.

The increase in enrollment figures for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) is an important indicator of progress, suggesting that efforts to mainstream education for these children have yielded tangible results. Yet, the persistently high dropout rates signal that enrollment alone is not a sufficient measure of inclusion. This supports prior research emphasizing the need for retention and quality indicators to assess the success of inclusive education initiatives. Retention challenges may be linked to both infrastructural barriers and social factors, as the study shows.

Teacher preparedness emerges as a critical bottleneck in the effective implementation of inclusive education. The shortage of adequately trained special educators and the limited professional development opportunities for general teachers reflect systemic weaknesses identified in earlier studies. The frustration expressed by teachers in this study echoes findings from national surveys, which highlight that teacher training programs often lack practical, hands-on components necessary to manage diverse classrooms. The mixed attitudes among teachers toward inclusion also point to the need for sustained sensitization efforts that go beyond one-time workshops to foster positive mindsets and confidence in handling inclusive classrooms.

Infrastructural inadequacies, including the lack of ramps, accessible toilets, and assistive technologies, remain a significant barrier, reinforcing conclusions from field studies across India. The disparity between urban and rural schools in this regard underscores the broader socio-economic divide that shapes educational access. While urban schools may have greater access to resources and NGOs that provide supplementary support, rural schools face compounded challenges due to limited funding, poor infrastructure, and scarce specialized services. This urban-rural divide reflects findings from national educational surveys, which consistently report lower enrollment and retention rates among marginalized groups in rural India.

Social attitudes and stigma towards children with disabilities also play a pivotal role in limiting true inclusion. The instances of bullying, social isolation, and parental resistance captured in this study resonate with existing

literature on disability and education in India. These social barriers not only impact the psychological well-being of children but also influence their academic engagement and overall school experience. Encouragingly, the study also identifies positive examples where community sensitization has fostered acceptance, pointing to the importance of sustained community engagement and awareness campaigns as integral to inclusive education strategies.

Funding and monitoring gaps revealed by this study highlight systemic inefficiencies that have been noted by other researchers and policy analysts. The inconsistent flow of funds and the lack of robust data management systems hinder effective resource allocation and program evaluation. This reflects broader challenges in the Indian public education sector where decentralized governance structures often complicate coordination. The disparities in per-student expenditure on inclusive education among states further emphasize the need for equity-focused budgeting and targeted interventions in underserved regions.

The research confirms significant regional disparities in inclusive education outcomes, with southern states generally outperforming northern states in both policy implementation and educational outcomes. This regional variation aligns with socio-economic patterns, administrative capacities, and political priorities, echoing conclusions drawn in earlier comparative studies of Indian states. Addressing these disparities requires context-specific strategies that recognize local challenges and leverage regional strengths.

In relation to the research questions, the study confirms that systemic and socio-cultural barriers remain the primary obstacles to inclusive education in India. These include insufficient teacher training, inadequate infrastructure, social stigma, and weak resource management. The current policies, while comprehensive on paper, lack the necessary enforcement and support structures to achieve their intended impact at the grassroots level. Moreover, the fragmented nature of program implementation and monitoring undermines efforts to create a cohesive inclusive education system.

To overcome these challenges, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Strengthening teacher education programs to include practical training on inclusive pedagogy is paramount. Developing accessible infrastructure in all schools, especially in rural areas, must be prioritized alongside the provision of assistive technologies and learning resources. Efforts to combat stigma through community involvement, peer sensitization, and awareness campaigns need to be scaled up and institutionalized within the education system. Additionally, ensuring timely and adequate funding coupled with robust data collection and monitoring mechanisms will improve transparency and program effectiveness.

This study also highlights the importance of contextualizing inclusive education policies within India's diverse socio-cultural and economic landscape. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to succeed given the variations in resource availability, social norms, and administrative capacities across states and regions. Tailoring strategies to local realities, involving community stakeholders, and fostering partnerships with NGOs and private sector entities can enhance the reach and impact of inclusive education programs.

In summary, while India has made notable policy advances towards inclusive education, significant gaps in implementation, capacity, and social acceptance remain.

Addressing these challenges requires not only technical and financial resources but also a sustained commitment to changing attitudes and strengthening institutional frameworks. This aligns with global research emphasizing that inclusive education is a complex, ongoing process rather than a fixed endpoint. By integrating these findings with existing knowledge, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how India can navigate the path towards truly inclusive education, ensuring that no child is left behind.

Conclusion

This study highlights that while India has established a strong policy foundation for inclusive education, significant gaps remain in its effective implementation. The research reveals persistent challenges related to inadequate teacher training, insufficient infrastructure, social stigma, and uneven resource allocation, particularly affecting rural and marginalized communities. Despite progress in increasing enrollment of children with special needs, retention and quality of education continue to be major concerns. The findings contribute to the field by providing a comprehensive understanding of the systemic and socio-cultural barriers that hinder inclusive education in India, emphasizing the critical need for coordinated efforts across policy, institutional, and community levels.

Practically, the study underscores the importance of enhancing teacher capacity, improving physical accessibility, ensuring consistent funding, and fostering inclusive attitudes among all stakeholders. Policy implications include the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, context-specific strategies tailored to regional disparities, and improved monitoring systems to track progress effectively. Ultimately, achieving inclusive education in India requires a sustained commitment to transforming both educational structures and societal perceptions.

As a final recommendation, a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach involving government agencies, educators, families, and civil society is essential to create learning environments that truly accommodate the diverse needs of all children, ensuring equitable access to quality education and supporting India's broader goals of social justice and development.

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