

Inclusive Education in India in Regards to Special Education: Challenges, Prospects and Collaborative Solutions

DR. ADITI GUPTA

Assistant Professor, Bharti College, University of Delhi

Abstract— Inclusive education is a transformative approach aimed at ensuring the presence, participation, and achievement of all students within the mainstream educational system. Its importance lies in fostering a tolerant and inclusive society by accommodating diverse learners, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses. In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aligns with inclusive education principles, emphasizing barrier-free access, assistive technologies, and choice of schooling for children with disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 complements these efforts by advocating for the social inclusion of special children through provisions for educational accommodations and support services. However, the implementation of inclusive education in India faces numerous challenges. These include negative attitudes from teachers, inadequate resources and infrastructure, lack of inclusive curriculum, limited parental awareness, inappropriate support infrastructure facilities and limited educators. To overcome these challenges, concerted efforts are needed. This entails fostering positive attitudes among educators, enhancing resource allocation, developing inclusive curriculum and raising parental awareness. While inclusive education holds immense potential for promoting social equality and educational access, its implementation requires addressing the multifaceted challenges through collaborative efforts from stakeholders.

Index Terms- Challenges, inclusive education, prospects, special education

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become an important aspect of India's educational landscape, particularly with the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020). The NEP 2020 has marked a shift towards creating a more inclusive and equitable educational system, especially for students with special needs. This policy framework aims to ensure that every child, regardless of their background or abilities, has access to quality education in an inclusive environment. India

faces significant challenges in ensuring that every child has access to quality education. Historically, children with disabilities or special needs have been marginalized and excluded from mainstream educational settings, leading to a lack of opportunities for their holistic development.

Despite various efforts done by governmental authorities, inclusive education in India still faces numerous challenges. These include inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of trained teachers, societal stigma and discrimination, and a lack of awareness and understanding about the needs of children with disabilities. However, there have been significant strides to overcome these challenges. The establishment of special schools, resource centres and inclusive classrooms within mainstream schools are a few measures that have been undertaken. These initiatives aim to provide a supportive learning environment where children with disabilities can access appropriate accommodations and support to help them succeed academically and socially.

Inclusive education is not just about integrating children with disabilities into mainstream educational system but also to create a culture of acceptance, understanding and respect for diversity within the educational system and society as a whole. It requires a holistic approach that addresses the needs of all learners and ensures that no child is left behind. Inclusive education might be a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a concerted effort from stakeholders from every strata of the society but it aim is to ensure that every child has access to quality education. Still, there is great potential for positive change and progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society and NEP 2020 aims at helping in the process.

II. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusive education ensures that all students have access to quality education by effectively addressing their diverse needs in a responsive, accepting and supportive manner. Students participate in a collaborative learning environment to eliminate barriers and obstacles that may lead to their exclusion from the society as a whole. Inclusive education takes place in a common learning environment, where students from different backgrounds and abilities learn together in an inclusive setting. It is not about isolating students with disabilities or special needs from their peers.

Inclusive education in India has been talked and researched about since our independence with the government constitutionally committing to ensure every child's right to basic education. Various policies around special education have been implemented which include the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme in 1974, The Kothari Commission in 1966 (emphasizing the importance of educating children with disabilities). The National Policy on Education in 1986 and the Programme of Action in 1992 also highlighted the importance of integrating children with special needs into mainstream education. The policy, which has now been adapted as National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, still talks about importance of inclusive education and collaborative ways to overcome these challenges faced still in the field.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has placed a strong emphasis on inclusive education as a fundamental principle guiding the educational system. The NEP envisions an education system that is accessible to all learners. The key features as envisioned in the NEP related to inclusive education include:

- 1) Universal Access and Equity - The NEP aims to ensure universal access to quality education for all children, including those from marginalized and disadvantaged groups. It seeks to bridge the gaps in access and participation by providing equal opportunities to all.
- 2) Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) - It emphasizes on the importance of early childhood care and education in promoting inclusive

development. It advocates for the integration of ECCE into the mainstream education system to ensure that every child receives a strong foundation for learning.

- 3) Special Education and Inclusive Practices - The NEP recognizes the need to address the diverse learning needs of students, including those with disabilities and special needs. It promotes the integration of special education services within regular schools to create an enabling environment for all learners.
- 4) Flexible Learning Environments - The NEP encourages the creation of flexible learning environments that accommodate the diverse needs of the learners. It advocates the use of technology and innovative teaching methods to personalize learning experiences and support education practices.
- 5) Teacher Training and Professional Development - The NEP emphasizes the importance of teacher training and professional development to promote inclusive education. It talks of integration of inclusive education principles and practices into teacher education programs to equip educators with the knowledge and skills needed to support diverse learners effectively.

III. SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS (SEDGS)

The NEP 2020 recognises that certain groups are grossly underrepresented in the existing educational systems. To address their educational needs, the NEP has included gender identities, sociocultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities and socio-economic conditions in a new social group called SEDGs. The policy aims to create inclusivity for these groups. These sub-groups have high dropout rates due to reasons ranging from lack of accessibility geographical to historical exclusion of communities from education system based on their socio-cultural identities. NEP 2020 has recommended certain policies and schemes like special scholarships, conditional cash transfers to incentivize parents to send their children to school to create more representation of such sub-groups.

Still, there are numerous challenges to this broad group hence created. It can be considered problematic

as the policy does not recognize caste differences as a historical factor nor does it prescribe the need for reservation. It does not acknowledge multiple factors prevalent in the society like the constant discrimination faced from multiple sources. There is no recognition of caste inclusion and affirmative action for teacher appointments either.

IV. LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

NEP 2020 recognizes children with special needs and talks about their inclusion into the mainstream education system. It aligns with the objectives set by The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016. It aims to recruit and train educators in mainstream schools to make sure that teaching is more inclusive and cognizant of the needs of children. Children with benchmark disabilities will be allowed to opt for home schooling and would be provided with skilled educators so that they can still acquire the best educational facilities. Teachers will be trained to identify learning disabilities in children early on and help them succeed in education. Alternate models for schooling will also be proposed to advance this objective.

In the context of special education, the NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of integrating students with special needs into mainstream educational settings. The provisions of the NEP 2020 which specifically talk about special education include:

- 1) Early Identification and Intervention - The policy emphasizes the early identification of children with special needs and the provision of appropriate interventions to support their learning and development from an early age.
- 2) Universal Design for Learning (UDL) - The NEP promotes the adoption of Universal Design for Learning to focus on creating flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learning needs and preferences.
- 3) Inclusive Pedagogy - The policy emphasizes on the need of inclusive pedagogy, which involves using teaching strategies and approaches that cater to the needs of all learners, including those with special needs.
- 4) Teacher Training and Support - It emphasizes the need for comprehensive teacher training programs to equip educators with the knowledge and skills

required to support students with special needs effectively.

- 5) Accessible Infrastructure - The policy underscores the importance of creating physically accessible and barrier-free educational infrastructure to ensure that students with disabilities can access school facilities without hindrance.

However, NEP fails to recognize that most teachers are poorly trained and it also does not take into account the problem of understaffing in Indian schools. The policy doesn't elucidate on how it plans to create home schooling mechanisms and how this will ensure education is made accessible to every individuals. It doesn't specify the change in curriculum to ensure that learners with special needs don't feel excluded.

NEP 2020 is in harmony with the provisions of the RPWD Act 2016. It follows all its recommendations regarding school education and inclusive education where the learners with or without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching is adapted to meet the learning needs of every student. The recommendations made in NEP based on RPWD 2016 include:

- 1) Barrier free access of educational facilities to learners with special needs.
- 2) Appropriate technology-based tools and language-appropriate teaching-learning materials and methods
- 3) Learners with benchmark disabilities can choose between regular or special schooling and home-based education. An audit of home-based education for its efficiency and effectiveness will be initiated and guidelines and standards would be developed based on the same.
- 4) Resource centres will support the rehabilitation and educational needs of learners with severe or multiple disabilities and will assist the guardians in achieving high-quality home schooling. Special educators along with regular teachers would assist for the same.

V. ISSUES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Some key issues that have been recognised in inclusive education system for learners with special needs by examining the policies and obstacles that hinder its effective implementation. By understanding

these challenges, we can work towards developing strategies and solutions to promote a more inclusive and equitable education system for all students.

- 1) Rate of Enrolment - The enrolment rate for learners with special needs to be as high as the rate of enrolment for children without disabilities in the mainstream school system. Also, due to the lack of peer support for learners with special needs, the dropout rate of such students also increases.
- 2) Lack of Competent Teachers - Teachers are a key factor in the implementation of inclusive education. But teachers lack the competency, relevant knowledge and pedagogical qualifications to achieve the goals of the policy. The teachers lack proper training and professional development at all levels.
- 3) Large Amount of Students in Classes - The public schools have high number of students in one class. This is a big problem for learners with special needs to get equal amount of learning and teaching experience.
- 4) Strict Curriculum - The curriculum prevalent in schools prevents learners with special needs to get equal learning opportunities with regular students. There is no specific curriculum made to meet the diverse needs of learners with special needs.
- 5) Negative Attitude of Parents and Teachers - There is a negative attitude of parents and teachers towards learners with special needs. They are not as supportive and at times hinder the education process. There is also a lack of desire on the part of the parents and society to as for the required changes to existing institutional systems.
- 6) Inadequate Infrastructure - The lack of infrastructure has been recognised as one of the main issues preventing the implementation of inclusive education. Classrooms lack resources that could help learners with special needs in the learning process.
- 7) Teaching Methods - Most schools use rigid teaching methods that prevent students of varying abilities from taking full advantage of the teaching process.

VI. CHALLENGES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The challenges posed in the inclusive education settings range from inadequate support services and resources to social stigmatization and negative attitudes. By addressing these challenges, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that empowers these learners.

- 1) Policy Enforcement - The institutions and agencies should be diligent and committed to support inclusive education policies without loopholes. They should be careful and also focus on the constitutional rights of the learners while providing the quality education.
- 2) Social Attitude towards Disability - There is a need for disability awareness programs in the educational and societal set ups to build positive attitude towards people with disabilities, special needs and marginalized children.
- 3) Parent Responsibility - Families of learners with special needs should be informed and made aware of the provisions they can be provided and their rights through information programs and advertisements in print and electronic media.
- 4) Creating Competent Educators - Pupils at teacher training centres and other such institutions should be provided with the skills to work with learners with special needs. They should be helped to create teaching methods that can be suitable for every learner.

VII. PROSPECTS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Inclusive education is a strategy aimed at ensuring universal access to education and promoting social equality for learners with special needs, allowing them to be admitted to public school systems without discrimination. It is a developmental approach that addresses the learning needs of all learners, with a focus on those who are marginalized and excluded. While there is growing support for inclusion in publications, policy papers, and workshops, some organizations and individuals question whether regular classes can adequately provide quality education for learners with special needs.

The primary goal of inclusive education is to bring together all partners in the Education for All (EFA) initiative to recognize the right to education and ensure access to quality education for individuals with disabilities. This initiative emphasizes the involvement of learners with special needs and their families in the development of key interventions. It promotes their participation in the development of policies and guidelines related to the education of these learners at all levels.

All government agencies and non-governmental organizations are committed to supporting the universal right to education for every individual. They aim to provide dedicated teacher support to regular teachers in the classroom whenever possible. Inclusive education, grounded in a human rights approach that values the learner and recognizes their potential in society, should be implemented not only as a program but also as an ideology embraced by teachers, parents, educators, and others involved in the education system.

VIII. STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Embedding the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion within the school education system serves as the cornerstone for ensuring access to education for all learners. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 underscores the pivotal role of education in achieving social justice and equality, highlighting its implications for fostering an inclusive community and society at large. However, for policy goals to materialize into practice, it is imperative to address educational barriers, facilities and services for learners with special needs.

The NEP integrates aspects of disability inclusion throughout its framework, featuring a special focus on equitable and inclusive education. It focuses on identifying issues, challenges and recommendations for bridging the gaps and reducing disparities in access and participation among all learners. The policy encompasses the inclusion of underrepresented student groups, including learners with special needs, under the umbrella term Socio- Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), which encompasses various identities such as gender, socio-cultural, socio-

economic, geographical, and disabilities. Aligned with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016, NEP advocates for provisions catering to the needs of these learners within the education system. Inclusive education, as endorsed by the policy, entails fostering a teaching-learning environment that is welcoming and supportive of all learners, irrespective of their learning styles, abilities, or disabilities. The policy emphasizes the equal participation and inclusion of learners with special needs across all stages of school education, endorsing a holistic approach to inclusion. This approach includes measures such as resourcing school complexes and resource centres, engaging special educators, capacity building for teachers and special educators, providing appropriate teaching-learning materials, and offering a diverse range of co-curricular activities such as arts, sports, and vocational education. Ultimately, these initiatives aim to equip all learners with 21st-century skills essential for their holistic development and future success.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education is a transformative endeavour aimed at ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or circumstances. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant step forward in this direction, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive, accessible, and supportive educational environment. By integrating principles of equity and inclusion into its framework, the NEP seeks to address historical inequities and promote the holistic development of every child.

Despite the progress made, several challenges persist. Issues such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficiently trained teachers, and societal attitudes continue to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. The dropout rates among learners with special needs, the lack of a flexible curriculum, and the absence of comprehensive support mechanisms underscore the need for continued efforts and reforms.

To achieve the goals set out by the NEP 2020 and to truly realize the vision of inclusive education, it is crucial to address these challenges through strategic and sustained efforts. This includes investing in teacher

training, improving infrastructure, and fostering a more inclusive societal attitude towards learners with special needs. Additionally, ensuring the effective implementation of policies and creating supportive learning environments will be key to overcoming these barriers.

The prospects for inclusive education are promising, as the commitment to universal access and equity continues to gain traction. By focusing on collaborative approaches, involving all stakeholders, and embracing a holistic perspective, India can make significant strides towards a more inclusive and equitable educational system. Ultimately, the goal is to build an education system that not only integrates learners with special needs but also celebrates and values diversity, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to society.

REFERENCES

- [1] N. Dash, *Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs*, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, January 2006.
- [2] S. Hegarty, and M. Alur, *Education & Children with Special Needs*, SAGE, June 2002.
- [3] A. Hossain, Inclusive education in India: opportunities and challenges, *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)* vol. 9, no. 1, 2021.
- [4] Kumar, and Kumar, Inclusive Education in India, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, vol. 2, no. 2, article 7, 2002.
- [5] M. Kumar, Inclusive Education and National Education Policy 2020: A Review. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol. 6, no. 9, 2021.
- [6] Lakshmi, Inclusive Education in India: Prospects and Challenges, *IJIRMP*, vol. 6, no. 5, pp.38–42, 2018.
- [7] MHRD Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities, 2005. Available: <http://www.education.nic.in>.
- [8] National Education Policy (NEP), 2020. Available: https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
- [9] L.P., *Learning for All: Equitable and Inclusive Education*, Ministry of Education, GoI. Available: <https://dsei.education.gov.in/inclusive-education>
- [10] Yadav, Inclusive Education in India: Issues, Challenges and Prospects, *International Journal of Advanced Education and Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp.14–16, 2023.