



History of Evolution and Development of Inclusive Education in India: A Study

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Abstract

One of the core objectives of NEP 2020 is to radically promote inclusive education in India. Inclusion is all about embracing the diversity of learners valuing their unique strengths, challenges and learning styles. Inclusion earlier meant, that children with disability will be allowed in regular classrooms which has been designed and curated for children without disabilities. But over the years, continuous restructuring of policies and practices have been done in this field. Inclusive education in classrooms has progressed significantly. For this, a system-wide transformation of schools and classrooms are required.

UNESCO (2005), states that. "Inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the state to educate all children." This paper mainly focuses on the how Inclusive Education has developed during the course of time in our country, India.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, RPwD Act, 2016, SEDGs, NEP 2020.

Introduction

The broader concept of Inclusion means that no matter how different, everyone is important. Each one of us belongs in society. Thus, Inclusive Education means providing education to each and every child of the society in a common setting. It does not matter whether they

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belong to any socio-economic background, any religion, or gender. It doesn't take into account the learners' abilities or disabilities.

Global agreements like the UNESCO Salamanca Statement, 1994 and the 1048, Universal Declaration of Human Rights have emphasized that every single child has a basic right to education. That they must be given the chance to learn and succeed.

According to RPwD Act, 2016, "Inclusive Education means a system of education wherein students with or without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities."

NEP 2020 on Inclusive Education states that "schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social and emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This means that children with disabilities, gifted children, street and working children, children from remote and nomadic populations, from linguistic, ethnic or religious minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups should all be included".

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to study the history behind the evolution and development of Inclusive Education in India.

EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA

The history of inclusive education in India reflects a profound constitutional, philosophical, and systemic evolution. Earlier, segregation was done heavily on the basis of disability. Now it has become a legally mandated framework of universal rights. Influenced by international milestones like the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), India's modern framework embraces a broad, intersectional understanding of inclusion. This today encompasses gender, caste, socio-economic disadvantage, and linguistic diversity. To make inclusive education more acceptable and well-received, we need to understand its developmental path. For proper chronological understanding, the whole developmental paths have been divided into 4 substantial eras.

1. Foundations of Social Inclusion: The Pre-Independence Era

This was before any "special education" was formalized. In this era, social reformers played very important roles. They viewed education as an instrument against systemic marginalization.

In 1848, Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule founded India's first institute for girls and also for lower-caste (Dalit) children. They believed that the vital key to dismantling deep-seated socio-structural exclusion was only through education.

Modern thinkers later pushed back against rigid educational walls. In 1921, Rabindranath

Tagore established Visva-Bharati emphasizing "learning without walls" in nature, and in 1937, Mahatma Gandhi's Nai Talim (Basic Education) focusing on experiential learning and the dignity of labor to bridge socioeconomic divides.

In 1885, the first formal institute for the learners with hearing disability was set up in Bombay, followed by an institute for the learners having visual impairment in Amritsar (1887). And in 1947, 65 highly segregated special schools have been opened all over India.

2. The Shift to Integration (1947–1980s): Post-Independence Era

After independence, the Constitution of India (1949) promised equality of status and opportunity for all. The RTE and public assistance in cases of disablement was provided in Article 41 (Directive Principles). This made possible the transition from complete exclusion to integration. This allowed special needs children to be introduced into mainstream environments. but the problem was- the child was required to adapt to the school and not the other way around as it should have been.

The Kothari Commission (1964–66) advocated that rather than segregated institutions, the disabled children be provided education within the regular, mainstream schools. It recommended the "Common School System".

IEDC, 1974 was launched by the Govt. of India. This was India's first formal scheme designed to integrate children with mild-to-moderate disabilities into normal school setups. This was to provide financial aids for books, uniforms, transportation, and equipment.

MHRD along with UNICEF launched the PIED in 1987. According to it, the main objective "was to promote inclusive education for children with physical and intellectual disabilities in India".

3. Universalization & The Rights-Based Era (1990s–2000s)

International mandates like the Jomtien Declaration (1990) and the Salamanca Statement (1994) played a very pivotal role in bringing about legal rights and changes in the notions and views of inclusion in India.

The PWD) Act, 1995 states that "children with disabilities up to the age of 18 were guaranteed access to free and appropriate education in appropriate environments". It was made statutory mandate for equity.

District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, 1994) was launched to boost primary education, focusing on providing access to marginalized groups, including girls and rural children. Teacher sensitization and structural modifications were key objectives of the programme.

The 86th Constitutional Amendment is considered as significant amendments in the history of inclusive education in India. It made education compulsory and free of cost for children

between the ages of 6–14. SSA acted as the primary medium to implement this. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001) ensured that regardless of the severity or category of their disability, no child could be denied enrollment in a mainstream school. It initiated the "Zero Rejection Policy".

4. The 21st Century: Systemic Equity and Intersectional Inclusion

Understanding and embracing the complex intersectionality of learners, the modern India has started designing learning environment based on their needs. The idea that 'inclusion' only concerns disability has been discarded.

The RTE Act, 2009 Section 12(1)(c) mandates that every private, unaided schools needs to reserve 25% of their entry-level seats for children who are economically weaker and groups that are disadvantaged. This has been done in an attempt to reshape the socio-economic fabric of urban classrooms.

The RPwD Act, 2016 enforces that, whether abled or disabled, children should be provided a common setting where they can learn. It is the system that has to provide customized environment for the learners. It also expanded the recognized disability categories from 7 to 21 which were given in the 1995 legislation.

The NEP 2020 brought a paradigm shift. Challenge groups were identified under the Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), such as gender identities, socio-cultural identities (SC, ST, OBC, minorities), geographical identities, and disabilities. NEP 2020 introduces Special Education Zones (SEZs). Such zones are to receive proper resource allocations, special educators deployed, aiming to eliminate barriers in learning environments. Another important feature is reforming evaluation via PARAKH i.e. "Performance, Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development". The traditional progress report has been replaced by the holistic process card.

CONCLUSION

Children have their own characteristics, their interests, aptitudes and different learning requirements. The journey for inclusion of special children in the mainstream has not been smooth and seamless but has reached so far with the initiatives, campaigns, different programmes and policies by the stakeholders. Our society values the diversity, disability and human rights. Earlier, educating special children was viewed merely as an obligation to provide proper accommodation for physical or cognitive impairment students. Now, it has been recognized that inclusive education can be a fundamental socio-economic lever that can enhance human capital. It can also help breaking down the system of discrimination and in the process strengthens democratic societies. The implementation of NEP 2020 gave way to the realization that only through bridging the deeply rooted social, economic, and physical divides, reforms are possible. Inclusive education should be integrated into the core of the framework of education, and not viewed as a marginal or specialized track

to be worked on. The policy focuses to create an equitable society by providing provisions such as Gender-Inclusion Fund (GIF), which is a financial support, specifically for female and transgender students under SEDGs. Responding to diversity is not what inclusion is all about. It also means that we need to provide quality education to all learners.

Thus, we can say that Inclusive Education in India has come a long way. To make this transformation a true success, we need to work on our local collaboration, sustained political will, and the provisions and opportunities for our educators to enhance and strengthen their skill, abilities, processes and resources. Only then, we can create sustainable systems in India's classrooms.

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