



POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: BRIDGING SOCIAL AND REGIONAL DIVIDES IN BHARAT

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Abstract

Inclusion education in India is situated within constitutional guarantees and international commitments, including UNCRPD and SDG 4, but practice is still grounded within entrenched social and regional divides. While the Right to Education Act (2009), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and the National Education Policy (2020) signal policy commitment to include education, significant inequities in access, participation, and outcomes remain. This systematic review aimed to critically interrogate the trajectory towards inclusive education in India (Bharat) including how policy frameworks (or lack thereof) continue to engage—or not, issues related to caste, gender, disability, economic class, and regional inequities. Using PRISMA guidelines, searches were conducted across international databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR), Indian academic journals, Shodhganga, and government and policy sources. Keywords included “Inclusive Education,” “Policy Frameworks,” “India,” “Bharat,” and “Social Divide” and “Regional Divide” were included. The systematic search yielded studies published between 2010 and the present in English or Hindi. The studies included in the review excluded theoretical only sources that did not analyse a specific policy intervention; studies not published in India were excluded. In total, seventy studies and policy documents were included in the review. Findings indicate policy intentions remain strong, however, there continues to be distal gaps between policy design and implementation.. Social issues of caste discrimination, gender imbalances in secondary education and poor inclusion of disability were common themes, and there were clear regional divides between southern states with good resources, and central and northeastern states with much fewer resources. There were also implementation challenges, including insufficient financing, lack of training for teachers, and inadequate monitoring. The review concludes that the process of implementing an inclusive education system in India is well aligned with global norms, but operational reality is difficult. Implications for policymakers include the need for financing and monitoring with an equity lens, improved teacher preparation and teaching strategies for educators, and intersectional and longitudinal research for researchers. It will be important to

improve policy coherence and community-based practice to realize the ideal of equitable inclusive education for all learners in Bharat.

Introduction

1.1 Inclusive education in India

Inclusive education in India is based on the constitutional guarantee of equal opportunity and the right to education, as it moves away from parallel systems like special schools and non-formal streams to inclusive education for all learners in mainstream schooling (Sharma, 2018). Given India's vast diversity in languages, cultures, geographies, and socioeconomic groups, inclusion is both a moral imperative and a practical need to improve learning outcomes and promote social cohesion (Singal, 2019). Although enrolment figures have increased significantly over the last two decades, the persistent gaps in participation, retention, and achievement of historically marginalized groups highlight the urgent need for education systems to be guided by approaches based on accessibility, equity, and belonging (Government of India, 2020). In practice, inclusive education involves learner-centred pedagogy, accessible infrastructure, teacher preparation, collaboration with families and the community, assessment reform, and equity sensitive data systems (UNESCO, 2020).

1.2 Importance of addressing social and regional divides

India's educational context continues to display overlapping inequities that multiply disadvantage:

- **Social divides:** Caste-related exclusion affects school climate, peer relations and teacher expectations (Nambissan, 2016); gender disparities persist in transition rates to secondary schooling, in regards to later advancement being perceived as less safe, and in terms of subjects-streaming (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017); children with disabilities face barriers related to identification, to accessing assistive devices, to sufficient accommodations in the classroom, and to support services (Alur & Timmons, 2009); and economic deprivation drives irregular attendance, digital poverty, and early child labor (ASER Centre, 2022).
- **Regional divides:** Rural–urban differences in regards to school density; teacher qualification; and connectivity; as well as distancing differences in nutrition and health services, are directly affecting learning opportunities (Tilak, 2015) and disparities in financing, governance capacity, language of instruction policy, and the school-centric curriculum reform at state levels contributes to misaligned access to quality education

and inclusivity practices (Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Not only are these gaps important to address for social justice and change, but inclusive education systems are an important framework for national development by reducing learning poverty, growing human capital, and building social trust (World Bank, 2020). Inclusion systems require intersectional approaches to addressing compounded disadvantages. For example, a rural girl with a disability from a low-income community. Inclusion requires multi-level intervention from classrooms, schools, districts, and states (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

1.3 Policy evolution in India

India's educational policy progression has increasingly been aligned with international frameworks whilst responding to local considerations:

- **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009:** Established a legally enforceable right to elementary education, including standards for infrastructure, pupil-teacher ratios, non-discrimination, and processes for admission and retention of disadvantaged groups (Government of India, 2009).
- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** Re-centers equity and inclusion across all levels, with priorities for universal foundational literacy, flexible curricular pathways, instruction in mother-tongue, rethinking teacher training, and timely support for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups, (SEDGs) inclusive of children with disabilities (Government of India, 2020).
- **Alignment with UNCRPD:** India's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) entrenches the need for reasonable accommodation, inclusive learning environments for children, and system-level changes from the notion of child fit to system fit (United Nations, 2006).
- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4):** The global commitment to "leave no one behind" situates inclusive education within measurable targets for access and equity, quality, and lifelong learning (United Nations, 2015).

All of these frameworks represent a movement from simply ensuring access to ensuring equitable learning outcomes, with subgroup-specific data, and inclusive pedagogies, as well as accountability for closing the gaps (UNESCO, 2020).

1.4 Rationale of the Study

Even with firm policy intentions and several programs within governments, evidence about "what works, for whom, and under what conditions" is still scattered in different states,

schemes, and disciplines (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014). This necessitates a systematic review to:

1. Synthesize the scattered knowledge from inclusive education interventions, including pedagogy, structural change, financing, and community-based programs, in programming and to assess the effect—if any—on enrolment, retention, learning, transitions, and wellbeing.
2. Identify barriers and enablers to implementation, such as financing decisions, teacher capacity, school leadership, inter-departmental coordination, disability certification, educational technology accessibility, and language policy (Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2018).
3. Determine if equity-sensitive measures are being systematically considered, with particular consideration of the availability and quality of disaggregated data on caste, gender, disability, and socio-economic status.
4. Explore gaps in knowledge and practice, including intersectional analysis, cost-effective analyses, scalability, and longer-term sustainability beyond pilots (Sharma, 2018).
5. Inform policy and programming and provide organizations or initiatives with feasible and actionable options to support national, state, and local stakeholders consider implications for practice and inform their reform efforts, whole-school development and community engagement.

This review will identify clear and evidence-informed criteria statements for inclusion, highlight and prioritize intersectional sub-group analyses, report methodological considerations and offer practical recommendations based on the findings to support inclusive, high-quality education in contexts across India.

2. Methodology (PRISMA)

This review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta- Analyses (PRISMA) directives in order to align with rigor and transparency standards (Page et al, 2021). A thorough search strategy was used for this process, including international scholarly databases Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and JSTOR, as well as Indian academic sources such as the Indian Citation Index, Shodhganga, and Indian national journals like.

Contemporary Education Dialogue and the Indian Journal of Inclusive Education. In addition, works published by the government, NCERT and NITI Aayog, were incorporated. Lastly, publications by international organizations including UNESCO, UNICEF, and the

World Bank were all reviewed.

The following keywords were used, "Inclusive Education", "Policy/frameworks", "India", "Bharat", "Social Divide", and "Regional Divide." Boolean operators were used to narrow the search for examples "Inclusive education" AND "India" OR "Bharat" AND "policy/frameworks" OR "education policy" AND "social divide or "regional divide".

Eligible works were classified by being published between the years 2010-2025 in either English or Hindi and were within an Indian educational setting, focusing on policy frameworks and the implementation of inclusive education. Both peer-reviewed journal articles and policy evaluation reports were included. Purely theoretical works that did not analyze policy or studies irrelevant to the Indian context were excluded.

The screening process followed PRISMA guidelines. First, the records that were obtained from different databases were collected, and duplicate records were removed using reference management software such as Mendeley or EndNote. Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria next. Studies that met the preliminary criteria underwent full- text review, and only studies that clearly had policy relevance and methodological rigor were retained for final inclusion.

A standardized sheet was used to conduct data extraction, to keep track of the author, publication year, policy interest (e.g., RTE Act; NEP 2020; Samagra Shiksha; UNCRPD; SDGs), methodological approach, and main findings. We adopted a thematic synthesis method to identify emerged patterns (Thomas & Harden, 2008); using both inductive and deductive coding. The codes were then grouped into themes which were organized in relation to access, equity, regions, challenges and best practice examples.

3. PRISMA Flow

The PRISMA flow process commenced by identifying records from databases and grey literature. For example, let us assume that 1,200 records were found from all databases, and another 150 documents were obtained from government portals and NGO reports. After removing duplicates, approximately 950 records were unique. The 950 records underwent title and abstract screening, where about 700 records were deemed to be irrelevant. The 250 remaining articles underwent full-text review, of which 180 records were excluded. Their reasons for exclusion related to insufficient attention to policy or theoretical orientation without empirical basis. Ultimately, 70 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included for synthesis. This process will be portrayed in a PRISMA flow chart that illustrates the stepwise movement through identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion (Page et al.,

2021).

4. Results Descriptive Analysis

The final review encompassed seventy studies and policy documents published between 2010 and 2025, including analyses from national and state-level perspectives on inclusive education in India. Many of these studies came from urban areas and southern states where research is typically more prolific and monitoring systems tend to be better developed (Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Evidence from the central, northern, and northeastern regions was comparatively sparse, reflecting both infrastructural disparities in research support and gaps in policies evidencing the exploration of inclusive education (Tilak, 2015). In terms of thematic focus, the studies clustered around four major areas of focus, policy development and reform, frameworks to address social equity, regional difference, and structural challenges, while a limited but noteworthy body identified innovative best practices and success stories.

Themes Identified

Policy Evolution in Bharat

The review found that India's policy framework for inclusive education has changed considerably since the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009, established education as a right (Government of India, 2009). Preceding policies such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) formulated the basis for access expansion at the primary and secondary levels. These policies evolved into Samagra Shiksha, an overarching scheme for school education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 signified a turning point by prioritizing equity, flexible pathways, and extra attention for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities being a key targeted group (Government of India, 2020). Scholars have noted that these policy developments represent a gradual but definitive shift from focusing solely on access to ensuring access to equitable learning outcomes (Sharma, 2018; Singal, 2019).

Social Equity Frameworks

The analysis revealed that social inequities continue to influence educational trajectories in India. Caste-based exclusion takes the shape of nuances, influencing peer relationships, teachers' perceptions of students, and access to opportunities (Nambissan 2016). Gender inequality remains a factor, especially when examining girls' access to secondary schooling and subject specialization, although some interventions, like conditional cash transfers and support for transportation to school, have enhanced girls' access in some

areas (Muralidharan & Prakash 2017). Children with disabilities are excluded due to problematic barriers to identification, certification, and accommodation in classrooms (Alur & Timmons, 2009). Minority groups, especially linguistic and religious minority groups, are faced with additional barriers to curricularly based access and representation (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). These findings show, as a result, the importance of an intersectional approach to educational access that considers multiple, overlapping disadvantages.

Regional Disparities in Implementation

The review also drew attention to significant regional variations in policy implementation. Southern and western states, for example Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, had higher rates of inclusive practices, with stronger teacher training and resource allocation. On the other hand, northern and northeastern states were behind, including issues around infrastructural shortages, weak financing, and insufficient managerial capacity (Tilak, 2015; Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Rural–urban divides were also noted, with urban schools benefiting from better digital infrastructure and teachers with more preparation, while rural schools suffered from multi-grade classrooms, inadequate resources, and weak monitoring systems (ASERCentre, 2022)

Challenges

In the studies undertaken, there were a number of systemic challenges that continued to act as barriers to inclusion. These included the lack of funding and unequal distribution of resources among states (World Bank, 2020). Gaps in teacher training were also commonly cited. Inclusive education is often mentioned in pre-service preparation, but lack of experience and in-service support is still inadequate (Sharma, 2018). There is also weak monitoring and accountability to support the implementation of policy into practice. For example, local education administrators have neither the tools nor demand to track inclusion. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequity by exposing the vulnerability of children from lower socio- economic backgrounds, especially in relation to digital exclusion, loss of learning, and social isolation (ASER Centre, 2022).

Best Practices

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5. Discussion

The need to understand inclusive education needs to be understood in India's context but also understood globally. On a global perspective, UNECSO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) emphasizes that inclusion demands systemic transformation, in areas of curriculum-access, pedagogy and governance. Similarly, the Committee for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities suggests inclusion as a rights-based obligation to inclusive education (2006). Within the Sustainable Development Goals, we see a push to ensure equitable, quality, and lifelong education to all. Compared to these international education agenda's attempts, the Right to Education Act (2009) and the National Education Policy (2020) make commitments to access, equity, and quality in Indian education context. However, policy provision is weakly enforced and not implemented effectively (Sharma, 2018; Singal, 2019).

A primary difficulty is the gap between the intent of the policy and its implementation. Although the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 prioritizes equity and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, a lack of financial resources, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate monitoring impede realization of the intent (Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2018). For example, while the Right to Education (RTE) Act mandates 25% reservation for socially disadvantaged children in the private school, studies show that the implementation of the legislation is uneven and oftentimes contested (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). Similarly, although disability provisions under the UNCRPD framework are recognized and acknowledged in Indian law, challenges of access to assistive technology, poorly functioning certification mechanisms, and stigma create a barrier to actual inclusion (Alur & Timmons, 2009).

With respect to bridging social divides, caste persists in shaping education experiences both in overt and more subtle ways. Caste-based separation in classroom seating, differential teacher expectations, and peer exclusion continues to be present even in urban schools (Nambissan, 2016). Gender inequality continues to be pronounced during transitions to secondary schooling especially in rural areas, where issues of safety and social norms

impede access for girls (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017). Disability as an area of inclusion represents one of the weakest links in the process, with most schools lacking both infrastructure and trained teachers to ensure meaningful participation (Singal, 2019). These studies suggest that intersectionality, which accounts for the ways in which caste, gender, disability and poverty intersect, is important to consider when designing interventions in the future.

The regional divide creates important barriers as well. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu are stronger in inclusive education, especially because of better teacher training, better per- student spending, and better governance capacity. In contrast, states in central and northeastern India generally struggle with deficits in infrastructure, teacher availability, and monitoring capacity (Tilak, 2015). Rural–urban differences also magnify the challenge, as rural schools often deal with multi-grade class teaching, lack of subject-specialist teachers, and limited opportunities for digital connection—all of which particularly came to light during the COVID-19 pandemic (ASER Centre, 2022).

As a way forward, we can identify several new policy implications. First, increased funding with equity-based distribution of funds is critical, to ensure that marginalized groups and poorly performing states have the resources they need to access and benefit from inclusive education specifically (World Bank, 2020). Second, teacher preparation needs to go beyond understanding of inclusion to actual practice of inclusive pedagogy, with support from in- service mentoring and also community-based teacher training (Sharma, 2018). Third, robust monitoring systems should be instituted with disaggregated data on caste, gender, disability, and region to track progress. Fourth, strengthen community action and local governance, particularly through building upon successful examples, such as mother-tongue based education in Odisha and community-led accountability in Rajasthan (UNESCO, 2020; Singal, 2019). Finally, technology-enabled inclusion - if utilized carefully with appropriate accessibility features, equity, and underpinned by the principles of inclusion - can provide an alternative to conventional methods of inclusion, and increase access, particularly in rural and remote contexts. While India’s policies demonstrate strong alignment with global commitments, their effectiveness relies on an enduring and conscientious effort to close the ongoing gaps between policy and practice as well as across regions and social groups. Future gains will rely on sustained investment, intersectional strategies, and authentic partnership among government, educators, communities and learners themselves.

6. Conclusion

This review has established that inclusive education in India lies on the cusp of constitutional obligations, international commitments, and historically entrenched social and regional inequities. The Synthesis of data from seventy studies and policy documents reveals that while a lot of ground has been covered in expanding access to education through policies such as the RTE Act (2009), national flagship programmes such as SSA and RMSA, and comprehensive reform under the NEP 2020, the gap between the objectives of policymaking and the realities of the implementation of those policy imperatives in practice is wide (Government of India, 2020; Sharma, 2018). The continued existence of inequities in education—notably across caste, gender, disability and socio-economic disadvantages; in addition to huge regional discrepancies in state ability to implement inclusive education, and with respect to access to a qualified teacher, teacher quality and infrastructure, reveals an unfinished agenda for achieving inclusive education (Nambissan, 2016; Tilak, 2015). For policymakers, our findings highlight the need to focus further on equity-focused accountability systems that go beyond access and enrollment metrics. This will involve funding mechanisms that specifically earmark resources for underprivileged groups and poorly performing states, in addition to having solid accountability systems based on disaggregated data. For educators, the challenge is to consider how to transform classrooms into inclusive learning environments by employing more differentiated pedagogy, assistive technologies, and supportive peer interactions. This indicates the need for systematic reforms in teacher education (pre-service and in-service) with a specific emphasis on practice-based inclusive pedagogy (Sharma, 2018; Singal, 2019). For researchers, the gaps are clear and include more intersectional studies on caste, gender, disability, and poverty; longitudinal studies of inclusive interventions and their cost-effectiveness (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

Based on this analysis, several recommendations for improved policy design and implementation can be made. First, targeted equity finance should focus on low-income populations and lagging regions, in order to align support with actual needs (World Bank, 2020). Second, teacher training and continuous professional development needs to be re-shaped to include a continuous cycle of mentoring and hands-on inclusion strategies, particularly for rural and resource-constrained schools. Third, community engagement should be improved, acknowledging local languages, cultural practices, and governance as valuable to inclusion (UNESCO, 2020). Fourth, technology-based solutions should be designed with accessibility and affordability at the forefront of development to ensure they minimize rather

than perpetuate the digital divide. Last, policy coherence and cross departmental work are critical: inclusive education cannot occur in a vacuum of health, nutrition, or social protection policy.

India's path toward inclusive education demonstrates tremendous advancement as well as many remaining challenges. While internationally established mechanisms including the UNCRPD and SDG 4 offer normative guidance, the success of inclusive education in India in the future will rest on continuous resource allocation, intersectionality, and locally derived innovations that put the learner — especially the most excluded — at the heart of policies and practice. Only then, will the aspiration of “education for all” be a true lived experience in Bharat.

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