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Beyond the School Gate: Special and Inclusive Education in India from Charity to Rights

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***Abstract*—The journey of special education in India reflects a gradual shift from charity-based, institution-centred services to a rights-based vision of inclusive education. This article explores the evolution of special education and critically examines both its progress and its limitations. It traces the development of early specialized institutions, the professionalization of the field through the Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992), and the succession of key legislations, including the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016). The paper also reviews the current policy landscape shaped by the National Education Policy 2020 and Samagra Shiksha, highlighting the gap that often exists between policy intentions and actual implementation. While access to schools has improved considerably for students with disabilities, the article emphasises that mere enrolment of children with disabilities alone cannot be treated as a measure of success. Genuine inclusion requires meaningful participation, accessible learning resources and achievement for all learners. Looking ahead, the future of special and inclusive education in India will depend on strengthening teacher preparation, ensuring early identification and support, creating accessible and responsive learning environments, using technology thoughtfully, and planning effective pathways from school to adulthood. The article concludes that inclusion is not merely about opening school doors but about creating systems that enable every learner to learn and succeed to lead an independent life.**

***Index Terms*—Special education; Inclusive education; Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016; Samagra Shiksha; National Education Policy 2020**

I. INTRODUCTION: RECONSIDERING THE MEANING OF EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

Education is both a fundamental human right and a powerful instrument for social justice. For children with disabilities, access to meaningful and equitable education is critical to achieving participation, dignity, and independence. Across the world, educational systems have undergone a paradigm shift from segregation toward inclusion, recognising that diversity is a natural

characteristic of human communities rather than a deficit requiring separation. In India, the journey of educating children with disabilities has been shaped by changing social attitudes, policy developments, and global movements advocating educational equity. Children with intellectual disabilities have traditionally experienced some of the greatest exclusion within educational systems due to misconceptions regarding their learning capacities, dependence, and future participation in society. This article covers special education broadly but gives particular attention to intellectual disability.

Today, inclusive education is increasingly viewed not merely as a placement strategy but as a transformative process that seeks to redesign educational systems to accommodate learner diversity. UNESCO's Salamanca Statement emphasised that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions, establishing inclusion as a global educational imperative (UNESCO, 1994). India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions schools as spaces where all learners can learn together with appropriate support (Ministry of Education, 2020). Yet important questions remain unanswered: What lessons emerge from the historical development of special education? To what extent has inclusive education fulfilled its promise? How can educational systems better address the needs of children with intellectual disabilities?

In India, early provisions grew from charity and conviction. The middle decades added government schemes and professional regulation. The recent decades have added enforceable rights. Each stage solved a problem and created another, and present difficulties are best understood as the inheritance of earlier solutions.

II. THE PAST: FROM SEGREGATED PROVISION TO RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES

Charity, family and the medical model

The organised education of children with disabilities in India began, as in many countries, outside the government. Parental organisations, missionary societies, philanthropists and later voluntary organisations opened the first institutions, mostly for children with blindness and those who were hard of hearing. A frequently cited early example is the school for the blind begun in Amritsar in 1887 by Annie Sharp, which moved to Dehradun in 1903 and later took her name (All India Confederation of the Blind, n.d.). The dominant philosophy reflected a charitable and medical model of disability, viewing disability as an individual deficit requiring specialised treatment (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2006).

The Indian experience of disability differs in important ways from Western histories of institutionalisation. While educational responses often followed segregated models through special schools and specialised services, social care for children with disabilities largely remained family-centred. The traditional joint family system frequently provided protection, belonging, and lifelong caregiving. Consequently, the challenge in India was not solely the physical segregation of children with disabilities from families, but their exclusion from meaningful educational participation, social recognition, and opportunities for self-determination. Inclusive education,

therefore, represents not the introduction of inclusion into Indian society, but the extension of longstanding familial inclusion into the domains of schooling, learning, and citizenship.

From integration to professional regulation

After independence the state's role grew gradually and unevenly, largely through welfare departments, scholarships and teacher-training centres, and the dominant idea remained rehabilitation. A conceptual shift came in 1974 with the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme, which sought to place children with mild to moderate disabilities in ordinary schools (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1992). The Project for Integrated Education for the Disabled of 1987, developed with UNICEF and NCERT, then adopted a "composite area" approach, converting the regular schools of a block into integrated schools that shared resources and special teachers (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005). However, integration differed fundamentally from inclusion. Children were expected to adapt to existing school structures rather than schools adapting to the needs of learners. Consequently, many students with intellectual disabilities continued to experience marginalisation despite being physically present in mainstream classrooms.

The National Policy on Education (1986) marked an important shift by advocating the integration of children with disabilities into regular schools and emphasising teacher preparation and equal educational opportunity (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986). However, this vision was only partially realised, as schools and teacher education systems were inadequately prepared to support large-scale integration. The professionalisation of special education gained momentum with the establishment of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which received statutory status under the RCI Act, 1992 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 1992). By regulating training, maintaining professional standards, and promoting research, the RCI enhanced the credibility of special education, giving the special educator a recognised qualification and a minimum standard. At the same time, it institutionalised separate pathways for the preparation of special and general educators, a divide that continues to shape inclusive education practices today.

Towards entitlement

Legislation moved from welfare towards entitlement, though not in a straight line. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 was the country's first comprehensive disability statute and contained a chapter on education, but left open what an "appropriate environment" for a child's schooling should mean (Ministry of Law and Justice, 1996). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 gave every child aged six to fourteen a justiciable right to elementary education (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009). Its 2012 amendment, examined by Rao et al. (2020), made the position of disability explicit: children with disabilities were brought within the category of disadvantaged groups, their right to a neighbourhood school was affirmed, and children with severe or multiple disabilities were permitted to opt for home-based education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2012).

The home-based provision can be read both ways, as a safeguard for children with high support needs and as a route by which schools may avoid them.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016), in force from 2017, replaced the 1995 Act and gave effect to India's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified in 2007 (United Nations, 2006). The Act expanded the recognised disabilities to twenty-one, defined inclusive education as learners with and without disabilities studying together with appropriately adapted teaching and learning, and required government-funded and recognised institutions to provide it. Section 31 extended free education for children with benchmark disabilities from six to eighteen years in a neighbourhood or special school of their choice, going beyond the age limits of the Right to Education Act, 2009.

The Act's retention of special schools as a legitimate option is an important historical reality, for inclusive education cannot be understood as a simple transition from a flawed past to an enlightened present. Specialised institutions were not merely sites of segregation; they were centres of innovation, expertise, and advocacy, where practices now regarded as essential to inclusion, including functional assessment, Braille and sign-language instruction, individualised planning, and sustained family engagement, were developed and refined. Earlier arrangements were thus simultaneously restrictive and productive, and contemporary inclusive education has emerged not in opposition to this legacy but, in many respects, from it. It is against this backdrop that the National Education Policy (2020) sought to reimagine inclusion as a systemic responsibility rather than a specialised provision.

III. THE PRESENT: POLICY COMMITMENTS AND EDUCATIONAL REALITIES

Policy commitments

The National Education Policy (2020) places inclusion at the centre of educational reform, affirming that children with disabilities should be enabled to participate fully in education from the foundational stage through higher education. The Policy identifies a range of supports necessary for this participation, including special educators with cross-disability expertise, resource centres, assistive technologies, accommodations, and accessible learning materials. Consistent with the RPwD Act (2016), it recognises both regular and special schools as legitimate educational options and envisages special educators and resource centres supporting children with severe or multiple disabilities as well as their families (Ministry of Education, 2020).

More importantly, the NEP 2020 does not position inclusive and special education as opposing models. In this vision, special schools remain valuable centres of expertise and support, while regular schools carry the primary responsibility for becoming more inclusive. NEP 2020 is, however, a policy framework rather than a record of accomplishment. Its success depends on implementation through programmes such as Samagra Shiksha, state-level initiatives, institutional capacity, and sustained investment in teacher preparation and support services.

Samagra Shiksha: laying the foundation

Samagra Shiksha, launched in 2018–19 as the Government of India's flagship school education programme, integrates Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, and Teacher Education into a unified programme from pre-school to Class XII. Its significance for children with disabilities lies in treating their education as a continuum from Class I to XII within the regular school system. Through a dedicated inclusive education component covering the disabilities recognised under the RPwD Act, it supports identification and assessment, aids and appliances, assistive learning materials, stipends, barrier-free infrastructure such as ramps and accessible toilets, home-based education, special educators, and capacity building for teachers. By placing funding, personnel and accessibility provisions behind the principle of neighbourhood schooling, Samagra Shiksha has laid the foundation on which more children with disabilities can enter and learn in mainstream classrooms, and it remains a principal vehicle through which the promise of the 2016 Act and NEP 2020 reaches schools (Ministry of Education, 2021, 2024; Press Information Bureau, 2019).

Beyond access: participation and support

Special and inclusive education lie on a continuum of support, and the useful question is which setting, with which supports, serves a particular child at a particular stage. A special school can be a site of specialised pedagogy and a resource for neighbouring schools. A regular school can be a place where a child is present but unreached. What the law protects is the family's ability to choose with reliable information, not an ideological decision made in advance.

The most important question today is not whether children with disabilities are in school, but whether they are genuinely learning and participating. Enrolment figures can conceal exclusion. The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) recorded 2,149,258 children with special needs (CWSN) in 2024–25, among 246.9 million enrolled students, about 0.87 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2025). Census 2011 counted 6.57 million children with disabilities aged five to 19 (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2015). The two sources are 14 years apart and not strictly comparable, but the gap suggests that many children with disabilities may still be outside school or unidentified.

Enrolment figures can conceal exclusion.

A child may be physically present in the classroom yet remain disconnected from instruction, unable to access learning materials, engage with peers, or demonstrate her abilities through appropriate forms of assessment. Inclusive education demands more than admission; it requires participation, belonging, achievement, and agency. Participation has several layers: access to the curriculum through adapted content, materials and assessment; communication, whether through Braille, Indian Sign Language, augmentative systems or a teacher's patience; membership of peer groups, play and school ceremonies; and a voice in decisions about one's own learning.

The challenge before schools is therefore to transform curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture so that all learners, including those with intellectual disabilities, can participate

meaningfully in the life of the classroom. This is sound in principle and demanding in practice, because individualised instruction and reasonable accommodation are labour-intensive in classrooms where one teacher serves many pupils at varied levels.

Everything ultimately turns on teachers. Policies may mandate inclusion and schools may open their doors, but meaningful participation is created or constrained in everyday classroom interactions. It is the teacher who determines whether a learner with an intellectual disability is invited into the learning process or remains a silent observer. For this reason, teacher preparation and continuous professional development remain among the most critical determinants of successful inclusion.

For children with intellectual disabilities, inclusion begins well before school entry. Early identification and intervention are critical for supporting communication, cognition, adaptive behaviour, and social development. Yet responsibility for these services is often distributed across health, early childhood, and education systems, creating gaps through which children may be missed. Families are usually the first to recognise developmental differences and remain the child's most consistent teachers and advocates, but they are not always treated as equal partners in educational planning.

As children enter school, the nature of support changes but the need for collaboration remains. Assistive and educational technologies can strengthen communication, engagement, independence, and access to the curriculum, and a learner with intellectual disability, a deaf learner, and a learner with visual impairment may each need different techno-pedagogical support. Inclusive education therefore requires an integrated approach that links early intervention, family partnership, skilled teaching, and appropriate technological support across the child's educational journey.

IV. THE FUTURE: FROM ACCESS TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

The present challenge is the distance between admission of children with disabilities and their meaningful participation, and the agenda is to close this gap through deliberate institutional work rather than further declarations. For systemic transformation, six concerns seem central. The first is the preparation of teachers. An inclusive system needs general teachers who plan for variation as routine and special educators who work as co-teachers and consultants as well as instructors of separate groups. The NEP's emphasis on cross-disability preparation answers a shortage of professionals, but breadth should not be bought at the expense of depth: teaching deaf learners, learners with visual impairment or children with autism and intellectual disability requires specialist knowledge that a short common module cannot supply. Mentoring, school-based learning communities and long-term professional development will matter more than one-time certification.

The second is early support organised around the child and family rather than departmental boundaries. Screening is worth little unless it leads promptly to assessment, intervention and a place in an accessible early-years setting, and parents need to be partners with information and a

voice, not recipients of instruction. Screening through the PRASHAST app (NCERT, n.d.) should focus on what happens to the flagged children and whether timely interventions are provided to them.

The third is accessibility treated as design rather than retrofit. Ramps and toilets are necessary, and still not universal: UDISE+ 2024–25 found ramps with handrails in 54.9 per cent of schools and toilets friendly to children with special needs in 35.6 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2025). A barrier-free school also has accessible textbooks, examinations that test what a candidate knows rather than how she writes, and timetables in which therapy and learning coexist. Where materials are planned for diversity from the outset, adaptation need not depend on a sympathetic teacher's private effort.

The fourth is the period after school. The RPwD Act 2016 directs governments to frame schemes for vocational training and self-employment (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016). NEP 2020 emphasises vocational exposure from Grade 6 for all students, including children with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2020). Yet transition planning is still not a reality. Efforts in this line should begin in early adolescence and connect vocational education, higher education, supported employment and independent living. A certificate that leads nowhere is a poor measure of success.

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The fifth is that technology must be used with great care and discipline. Artificial intelligence and educational technologies can lower genuine barriers through speech recognition, text-to-speech, captioning, adaptive reading support, spell checkers and communication aids. The risks, however, extend beyond accessibility. The collection of children's learning, health, and behavioural data raises important concerns about privacy, consent, and data security that school systems are often not fully prepared to address.

In India, any discussion of technology must also acknowledge the persistent digital divide: UDISE+ 2024–25 found computer facilities in 64.7 per cent of schools and internet access in 63.5 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2025). Many families also face constraints of electricity, digital literacy, and affordability. For this reason, technological solutions should be supplements rather than prerequisites for inclusion, and must be affordable and feasible within the realities of diverse schools and communities. The real measure of success is whether technology extends a skilled teacher's reach, strengthens autonomy of children with disabilities and has been selected with the active participation of children with disabilities and their families, rather than becoming an expensive solution that benefits only a few.

The sixth is evidence and accountability. India needs more context-sensitive research, conducted in classrooms across states and languages, with children with disabilities as participants and not merely as subjects. It needs monitoring that follows learning, attendance, retention and transition rather than enrolment alone. Audit evidence shows why: a CAG performance audit of Samagra Shiksha in West Bengal found that children with special needs were deprived of transport allowances (30–56 per cent) and escort allowances (35–49 per cent) (Comptroller and Auditor General of India [CAG], 2026), a reminder that entitlements on paper must actually reach the child.

Understanding how school culture, teacher practices, peer relationships, family engagement, curriculum adaptations, and support services interact to influence educational outcomes is critical for moving beyond access towards meaningful inclusion.

The promise of inclusion will be realised not only through rights and policies but through sustained commitment, accountability, and investment. The question for India is how much it is willing to invest, financially, institutionally, and socially, so that children with disabilities are not merely present in schools but able to learn, participate, and contribute.

V. CONCLUSION

The history of special education in India reflects a remarkable journey from charity and segregation towards rights, participation, and inclusion. Early philanthropic efforts created educational opportunities where none existed, while government initiatives, professional preparation, and specialised services gradually built the foundations of the field. Subsequent developments, including the Right to Education Act, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, Samagra Shiksha, and the National Education Policy 2020, have progressively expanded this vision and affirmed education as a right rather than an act of charity.

Yet, in 2026, the journey remains unfinished. While significant progress has been made in expanding access and strengthening legal safeguards, the central challenge today is one that legislation alone cannot resolve: transforming the right to education into a daily experience of learning, participation, belonging, and dignity for every child with a disability. Meaningful inclusion requires systemic change through teacher empowerment, curriculum reform, adequate resource allocation, accountability, and attitudinal transformation. Ultimately, the success of inclusive education will be judged not by the number of children who enter school, but by whether they are able to participate fully, experience achievement, develop meaningful relationships, and shape their own futures.

India, however, begins the next stage from a position of strength. What was once an aspiration is now recognised as a right, supported by a strong legislative and policy foundation. The task ahead is to translate this vision into classroom realities, and the foundations already laid give good reason for optimism. When every child is valued as a learner and contributor, the promise of inclusive education will be fully realised.

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