



## Inclusive Education in the NEP 2020 Era: Promises, practices, and Pitfalls

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### Abstract

Inclusive education is central to building an equitable education system in India. While the idea of inclusion has long been part of policy discussions, actual progress in classrooms has been uneven. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places a strong emphasis on inclusive education, aiming to ensure that every child, regardless of background or ability, has access to quality learning. This paper examines the present scenario of inclusive education in India and evaluates how NEP 2020 addresses existing challenges related to infrastructure, teacher preparedness, digital access, and social barriers. Drawing from national datasets, policy documents, and secondary literature, the study highlights both the persistent gaps in implementation and emerging innovations that show promise. Particular attention is given to low-cost assistive technologies, teacher training initiatives, and community-based interventions that support inclusive learning. The analysis suggests that while NEP 2020 presents a progressive framework, translating its vision into practice requires a locally grounded, empathetic approach supported by continuous investment in human and institutional capacity. This study offers practical, evidence-based recommendations to help bridge the persistent gap between policy intent and classroom reality moving inclusive education in India from aspiration to meaningful implementation.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, NEP 2020, India, educational equity, accessibility, marginalized learners, policy implementation, teacher training, assistive technology

### Introduction

Inclusive education is not just a policy objective it is a moral and social responsibility that urges every education system to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all children, regardless of their background, ability, or identity. In India, where diversity is both a cultural strength and a source of deep inequality, the need for inclusive education is especially urgent. The challenge lies not only in bringing children from marginalized communities into the classroom, but also in ensuring that they feel supported, respected, and engaged once they are there. For decades, India's education system has struggled to address the needs of students who have been excluded due to disability, caste, gender, socio-economic status, or language barriers. While there have been national policies and schemes aimed at bridging these gaps, the impact has often been inconsistent limited by weak implementation, fragmented efforts, and a lack of systemic follow-through. As a result, inclusion in many schools remains limited to physical presence rather than true participation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a renewed opportunity to shift the system toward equity and inclusion. It acknowledges the structural and social barriers that keep many learners on the margins and outlines reforms across the educational spectrum from early childhood to higher education. Key provisions like the Gender Inclusion Fund, special education zones, and teacher sensitization programs reflect an awareness that inclusion cannot be achieved through access alone. Yet the gap between policy and practice remains wide. Many schools still lack basic infrastructure like ramps or accessible toilets. Inclusive pedagogical strategies are rare, and most teachers receive little or no training in supporting diverse learners. The growing reliance on digital learning has added new exclusions, particularly for rural and low-income communities. Additionally, the shift to digital learning has

introduced new exclusionary barriers, especially for children from low- income or rural backgrounds (NSO, 2021) <sup>[11]</sup>. This paper aims to examine NEP 2020's inclusive education vision more closely its potential, its shortcomings, and the conditions necessary to bridge the gap. By exploring both challenges and existing innovations across schools, communities, and institutions, the study offers grounded pathways toward making inclusive education a more consistent and lived reality across India.

### Objectives of The Study

#### The present study has the following objectives

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the current state of inclusive education in India in light of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To explore the key challenges impeding the implementation of inclusive education
- To analyze the provisions and intent of NEP 2020 with respect to inclusive education, and assess how these align with existing educational realities.
- To identify innovative practices and models both policy-led and grassroots that have demonstrated success in promoting inclusive education in diverse Indian contexts.
- To offer evidence-based recommendations for bridging the gap between NEP 2020's vision and actual classroom practices, with a focus on teacher preparedness, accessibility, community engagement, and data-driven monitoring.

### Research Question

#### The present study has the following research question

- What are the major challenges hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education in India,

particularly in terms of infrastructure, pedagogy, and systemic support?

- To what extent do the provisions and intent of NEP 2020 align with the actual state of inclusive education in Indian schools?
- What innovative practices policy-led or grassroots are emerging that contribute meaningfully to inclusive education?
- What actionable, evidence-based strategies can help bridge the gap between NEP 2020's vision and on-ground classroom realities, especially regarding teacher training, accessibility, and community engagement?

### Review of Related Literature

Inclusive education has emerged as a global educational priority, reflecting a shift from segregated schooling to one that embraces diversity within mainstream classrooms. Rooted in the belief that all children have the right to learn together, inclusive education seeks to create learning environments that respect and respond to individual differences.

### Global Perspectives on Inclusive Education

**Ainscow (2005)** <sup>[1]</sup> emphasize that inclusion must be viewed not only as the placement of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, but as a systemic approach to reforming school culture, curriculum, and pedagogy for all learners.

**Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011)** <sup>[3]</sup> argue that inclusive education is most successful when teaching is designed to be responsive to student variability, not conformity. These international perspectives provide a useful framework for analyzing India's efforts, particularly within the NEP 2020 context.

Internationally, inclusive education has been strongly promoted through frameworks like the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), both of which call for "inclusive and equitable quality education for all." Countries such as Finland, Canada, and Australia have demonstrated the benefits of inclusive education through national strategies that invest in teacher training, universal design for learning (UDL), and individualized support plans. However, global studies also point out persistent challenges. A common concern is that while inclusion is often embraced in principle, schools may lack the resources, training, or institutional culture to support diverse learners meaningfully—especially in low- and middle-income countries.

### Evolution of Inclusive Education in India

India's journey toward inclusive education has been shaped by legislation and policy milestones, from the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995) to the Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009). Despite these initiatives, studies reveal that implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in rural and under-resourced regions (Suja & Elamaran, 2024) <sup>[17]</sup>.

A historical review by Bhat and Geelani (2018) <sup>[2]</sup> emphasizes that despite decades of policy push, inclusive education has struggled due to lack of inter-sectoral collaboration and limited community awareness, especially for children with disabilities (Bhat & Geelani, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>. They argue for stronger community-based models that address local barriers directly.

**Kumar and Taneja (2023)** <sup>[8]</sup>, in a recent field-based study in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, found that schools that engaged community volunteers and local health workers in their inclusive planning process were more successful in retaining children with special needs

### NEP 2020 and India's Renewed Vision for Inclusion

The NEP 2020 places equity and inclusion at the center of its reform agenda, introducing tools like the Gender Inclusion Fund, SEDG-targeted interventions, and greater teacher training provisions (Rasool, 2024) <sup>[12]</sup>, (Kalita, 2024) <sup>[7]</sup>. While the policy outlines a progressive vision, several scholars have raised concerns over real-world implementation. Halder (2024) <sup>[6]</sup> points out that inclusive goals remain underfunded and poorly monitored in many states. Similarly, Singh and Mishra (2023) <sup>[16]</sup> argue that without stronger alignment between constitutional provisions and execution mechanisms, inclusion may remain more symbolic than transformative.

### Key Themes in Indian Research: Challenges and Practices

Lack of ramps, accessible learning materials, and assistive technologies, Teacher Preparedness: Inadequate pre-service and in-service training in inclusive pedagogy (Shivam, 2025) <sup>[15]</sup>

Social Stigma and Cultural Attitudes: Continued discrimination against children from marginalized castes or with disabilities (Sardar *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[13]</sup>. Encouragingly, grassroots innovations and partnerships with NGOs have shown that inclusive practices—when adapted to local contexts can lead to measurable improvements in participation and retention.

### Gaps in the Literature

Although policy literature is abundant, there is a shortage of field-based, longitudinal studies in the Indian context. Most research focuses on policy analysis or small pilot interventions, with limited attention to student voice, parental involvement, or tracking outcomes of inclusion over time. The literature makes clear that while NEP 2020 offers a solid blueprint for inclusive education, successful implementation depends on deep structural reforms, teacher support, and culturally responsive strategies.

### Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research based on secondary data analysis. It aims to critically examine the challenges and practices associated with inclusive education in India, with particular reference to the intent and implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Rather than collecting primary data, the research relies on a thematic synthesis of secondary sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed studies on inclusive education (2016–2024)
- Government reports and datasets (e.g., UDISE+ 2021–22, NCERT publications)
- Policy texts, including NEP 2020 and Samagra Shiksha guidelines
- Grey literature from NGOs and civil society organizations

A thematic analysis framework was employed to identify key challenges, effective practices, and areas where policy

provisions diverge from ground-level realities. Literature and data were organized around core themes such as infrastructure, teacher preparedness, curriculum flexibility, community engagement, and technology access.

While no primary fieldwork was conducted, quantitative indicators such as infrastructure coverage and digital access were included to support the qualitative analysis. Real-world case examples from state and NGO-led models further enriched the contextual understanding and grounded the study's conclusions and recommendations.

## Findings and Analysis

### Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Inclusive education in India remains obstructed by a network of structural, pedagogical, and social barriers that consistently limit the effectiveness of equity-focused reforms.

**Infrastructure Gaps:** Despite years of policy commitment, the absence of fundamental accessibility infrastructure like ramps, tactile paths, or inclusive toilets remains a glaring issue. According to UDISE+ (2022) <sup>[21]</sup>, nearly one-third of schools lack ramps, and over 25% do not have disabled-friendly toilets. This is not just a logistical oversight but an institutional failure to recognize physical accessibility as a precondition for participation. Unlike in countries where inclusion begins with architectural accessibility (e.g., Brazil's national inclusion standards), India still treats it as a secondary concern.

**Teacher Preparedness and Attitudes:** The capacity and willingness of teachers to engage with inclusive pedagogy remains low. Shivam (2025) <sup>[15]</sup> found that more than 65% of teachers felt unequipped to support children with diverse learning needs. The discomfort often stems from the lack of exposure to differentiated teaching during their training years. India's teacher education continues to prioritize content delivery over inclusive methodologies, whereas nations like Finland have embedded reflective inclusive practices at the foundational level of teacher preparation.

**Curriculum Rigidity and Assessment Norms:** The current national curriculum framework rewards conformity and high-stakes assessment. There is minimal room for differentiated instruction, and even lesser for alternative assessments. This inflexibility disproportionately impacts learners with disabilities and those from non-dominant linguistic or cultural backgrounds, reinforcing exclusion through silence rather than intent.

**Social Exclusion and Caste-Gender Biases:** Educational exclusion is rarely singular. Children from Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim communities particularly girls with disabilities experience compounded marginalization. Rasool (2024) <sup>[12]</sup> emphasizes that subtle forms of tracking and labeling still persist in classrooms, where these students are implicitly placed in lower- expectation roles or segregated from mainstream tasks.

**Digital Inequity and Technological Design:** The digital push post-COVID has widened learning gaps. According to NSO (2021) <sup>[11]</sup>, fewer than 15% of rural households with CWSN have access to appropriate assistive digital tools. Moreover, most EdTech platforms are built for "average" learners, rarely accommodating screen readers, closed

captions, or multi-sensory content ignoring global best practices in Universal Design for Learning.

These challenges underscore a critical misalignment between the ideal of inclusive education and the day-to-day realities of Indian schooling. Inclusion remains peripheral—not yet a systemic default. Addressing these issues requires a rethinking of both mindset and mechanism, supported by sustained political will and resource alignment.

### Policy Provisions vs. Ground Realities

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been widely recognized for its progressive vision and explicit emphasis on inclusive education. It outlines a multi-layered approach covering early childhood to higher education—to ensure equitable learning for historically marginalized groups. Provisions such as the Gender Inclusion Fund, the establishment of Special Education Zones, and mandatory exposure to inclusive pedagogy in teacher education reflect a clear policy intention to overhaul structural exclusion (Ministry of Education, 2020) <sup>[10]</sup>. However, translating this vision into practice has proven complex, uneven, and, in many states, largely rhetorical. At a policy level, NEP 2020 is well-aligned with global inclusive frameworks, echoing the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and the Incheon Declaration for Education 2030. Its language emphasizes universal access, equity, and flexibility. Yet these principles face significant resistance in day-to-day educational governance. Kalita (2024) <sup>[7]</sup> points out that while states have the mandate to develop their own NEP implementation plans, only a handful have created actionable roadmaps specifically for inclusion. Even fewer have integrated inclusion metrics into school performance indicators.

One of the most glaring disconnects lies in teacher education reform. Although the policy mandates that all B.Ed. programs must include modules on inclusive pedagogy, this has largely been interpreted as a theoretical addition rather than a practical overhaul. According to Shivam (2025) <sup>[15]</sup>, most teacher education institutions have not restructured their curricula in meaningful ways. Field data from his study indicates that student-teachers complete these modules without hands-on exposure to inclusive classroom practices or differentiated instruction models.

Another area of concern is budget utilization under Samagra Shiksha, which provides central funding for inclusive infrastructure, resource rooms, and teacher training. According to recent utilization reports, more than 40% of allocated funds for inclusive education remain unspent in several states, especially in the North and Northeast. Implementation delays are compounded by weak coordination between education departments, local bodies, and disability commissions. In many schools, inclusion remains interpreted as physical placement, not curriculum adaptation or support services.

Moreover, the monitoring and accountability systems lack specificity. NEP 2020 recommends school-level report cards and self-assessments, but few of these tools include robust indicators for inclusion. As a result, inclusive goals remain aspirational, difficult to measure, and easy to deprioritize. While NEP 2020 has provided a much-needed framework to revitalize inclusive education, its potential is currently constrained by weak operationalization, fragmented governance, and a lack of state-level accountability. Bridging this policy-practice gap will require deeper structural changes, especially in teacher preparation, financial monitoring, and interdepartmental collaboration.

### **Innovations and Good Practices**

While systemic gaps continue to challenge the effective implementation of inclusive education, several innovative models and practices across India illustrate the potential of context-responsive, grassroots-driven, and policy-aligned interventions. These examples show that when inclusion is locally owned and community-supported, meaningful transformation is possible even within the limitations of existing systems.

#### **Prerna (Maharashtra): Mobile Learning for CWSN**

The *Prerna* initiative in Maharashtra has gained national attention for its integrated approach to supporting children with special needs (CWSN). The program provides mobile assistive learning kits, creates peer-support structures, and mobilizes Village Education Committees (VECs) to co-own inclusive strategies. According to state evaluation reports (2023), schools under the *Prerna* umbrella saw a 26% increase in attendance and participation of students with disabilities within the first academic year. Importantly, teachers were trained to adapt curriculum content for diverse learners using locally relevant, low-tech methods—bridging the digital and cultural gap simultaneously.

#### **Tamil Nadu's Block Resource Centres (BRCs): Mentored Inclusion**

Tamil Nadu's BRC model offers a decentralized mechanism for continuous teacher support. Rather than relying on one-off workshops, these centers provide recurring training, on-site mentoring, and peer collaboration opportunities. A study by Sardar and Saha (2024) <sup>[13]</sup> reports that 60% of schools participating in the BRC-led inclusion program demonstrated improved classroom accommodations, flexible assessments, and use of multi-sensory instructional strategies. The presence of itinerant special educators further enhances the real-time applicability of inclusive pedagogy.

#### **NGO Collaboration: Vision Empower and Samarthyam**

Non-governmental organizations have played a crucial role in advancing inclusive education, particularly in specialized domains. Vision Empower, for instance, has developed accessible STEM learning content for visually impaired students, incorporating tactile graphics, audio-based explanations, and Braille-enabled activity books. Similarly, Samarthyam has worked on inclusive physical environments, helping schools adopt Universal Design principles. Evaluations from pilot schools in Karnataka and Gujarat show marked improvement in concept retention and classroom participation among students with disabilities.

#### **Community-Driven Inclusion: Jharkhand and Odisha**

In tribal districts of Jharkhand and Odisha, community-led inclusion models have demonstrated significant success in retention, attendance, and psycho-social well-being of CWSN. These models integrate parents, community health workers, and local NGOs in school-level decision-making. As noted by Rasool (2024) <sup>[12]</sup>, the success here lies in shared accountability, regular home visits, and culturally rooted practices that view inclusion as a social responsibility rather than a government mandate. These innovations underscore that inclusion cannot be achieved through policy mandates alone. Real change emerges where local ecosystems are empowered—through training, funding autonomy, and a shared cultural belief in the value of

inclusive schooling. These practices offer a valuable blueprint for scaling NEP 2020's goals beyond pilot projects into systemic transformation.

#### **Bridging the Policy- Practice Gap**

While NEP 2020 articulates a strong vision for inclusive education, this vision often falters at the level of implementation. The gap between intention and action can be attributed to systemic weaknesses, fragmented coordination, and a lack of sustained investment in capacity-building. Bridging this policy-practice gap demands deeper institutional responses that are grounded in both data and day-to-day realities.

**Decentralized Planning and Budget Autonomy:** Studies have shown that district-level planning, when done with community participation, yields stronger ownership and more locally relevant outcomes (Kalita, 2024) <sup>[7]</sup>. In contrast, states with highly centralized allocation have seen underutilization of inclusion budgets. For instance, several districts in Uttar Pradesh reported less than 50% expenditure of funds meant for inclusive infrastructure in 2021–22 (Samagra Shiksha Reports, 2022) <sup>[18]</sup>. Empowering schools to adapt budgets for needs like assistive tools or community outreach ensures more effective inclusion.

**Strengthening In-Service Teacher Support:** As Shivam (2025) <sup>[15]</sup> and Sardar & Saha (2024) <sup>[13]</sup> note, one-off workshops have little lasting impact. Tamil Nadu's BRC model, which integrates mentoring and classroom-based follow-ups, saw inclusive practices adopted in over 60% of participating schools. Mentorship, rather than training alone, enables teachers to experiment, reflect, and internalize inclusive methods over time.

#### **Data-Driven Monitoring and Targeted Interventions:**

While UDISE+ tracks basic enrolment and infrastructure, it lacks disaggregated inclusion indicators. Himachal Pradesh and Kerala have piloted school-level dashboards that include measures like IEP progress, teacher training coverage, and accessibility audits. Such tools not only enable real-time response but also hold local education bodies accountable.

**Leadership and Inclusive Culture:** Inclusion thrives in schools where leadership fosters collaboration, equity, and responsiveness. A case study from Jharkhand (Rasool, 2024) <sup>[12]</sup> showed that schools led by headmasters trained in inclusive leadership had higher attendance rates among CWSN and more active parental involvement. Without leadership buy-in, policy tools rarely shift deep-seated biases and exclusionary norms.

The policy–practice divide persists because systemic levers planning, pedagogy, leadership, and monitoring often operate in isolation. To move from pilot projects to sustained transformation, these domains must be integrated into a coherent, long-term implementation ecosystem. Inclusion cannot be a checklist it must be embedded in how schools think, plan, and teach every day.

#### **Recommendations**

Translating the inclusive vision of NEP 2020 into meaningful classroom practices requires thoughtful, multi-level action. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the key

gaps and support the practical realization of inclusive education in India.

### **Prioritize Practical and Ongoing Teacher Training**

Teachers must be prepared not only in theory but also in practice. Inclusive pedagogy should be integrated into the core of all pre-service teacher education programs, with an emphasis on exposure to diverse classrooms and real-world scenarios. Continuous in-service training, including mentorship, classroom observation, and peer collaboration, is essential to help teachers apply inclusive methods with confidence. This approach ensures that inclusion becomes a professional habit, not just an academic concept.

### **Encourage Contextual and Decentralized Planning**

Inclusion efforts should be focused to local needs. States, districts, and schools must be supported to develop their own inclusion strategies that consider cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity. School Development Plans should include inclusive goals, created with input from community stakeholders such as parents and local organizations. Greater budgetary flexibility under schemes like Samagra Shiksha can allow schools to address locally specific barriers more effectively.

### **Improve Accessibility in Physical and Digital Environments**

Accessible infrastructure must become standard across all schools, including ramps, tactile signage, and disability-friendly toilets. In the digital space, assistive technology and inclusive EdTech tools should be made widely available, particularly in underserved regions. Government-supported initiatives can help scale up the availability of these tools, ensuring that no child is excluded from learning because of a lack of basic access.

### **Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability for Inclusion**

Tracking progress in inclusive education requires the integration of clear, measurable indicators into monitoring systems such as UDISE+. These may include school-level audits of infrastructure, training participation rates, and disaggregated data on access and learning outcomes. Tools used by states like Kerala can serve as models for building inclusive, data-informed planning processes. Transparent monitoring not only improves planning but also helps hold systems accountable to students and families.

### **Support Inclusive Leadership and School Culture**

The success of inclusive education is closely tied to leadership at the school level. Headteachers and principals who prioritize inclusion help foster school environments where equity is part of the culture. Leadership development programs should include modules on inclusive values, equity-driven management, and community engagement. Schools that actively celebrate diversity tend to be more effective in sustaining inclusion efforts.

### **Conclusion**

Inclusive education, as envisioned in India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, aspires to create a more equitable and accessible learning environment for all students. With specific references to children with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and linguistic minorities, the policy outlines a forward-looking framework. However, this study finds that the translation of

policy into practice remains slow and uneven across the country. The findings reveal a persistent disconnect between NEP 2020's intent and school-level realities. According to UDISE+ (2022)<sup>[21]</sup>, over 30% of Indian schools still lack ramps, and more than 25% lack accessible toilets. Only a small fraction of B.Ed. programs have integrated practical inclusive training, and over 65% of teachers report feeling unprepared to teach students with special needs (Shivam, 2025)<sup>[15]</sup>. The digital divide, particularly for rural CWSN learners, also continues to exclude many, with NSO (2021)<sup>[11]</sup> showing that less than 15% of households have access to adaptive EdTech tools.

At the same time, the research identifies promising innovations. The *Prerna* initiative in Maharashtra reported a 26% increase in student engagement among CWSN after introducing mobile learning kits and peer mentorship. Tamil Nadu's BRC-based teacher mentoring system has improved inclusive practices in over 60% of participating schools (Sardar & Saha, 2024)<sup>[13]</sup>. These examples underscore the potential of localized, community-responsive models in advancing NEP 2020's goals.

The study concludes that inclusive education in India cannot be realized through top-down policy alone. It requires a synchronized strategy combining infrastructure improvement, teacher support, decentralized planning, and embedded monitoring systems. School leadership, local ownership, and cultural responsiveness emerge as non-negotiable enablers.

Inclusion is more than access it is about participation, respect, and belonging. As this study shows, making inclusive education a lived reality in India demands coordinated efforts across policy, pedagogy, and practice. If NEP 2020 is to fulfill its transformative promise, stakeholders must act urgently and collaboratively to shift from theoretical inclusion to daily, functional equity in every Indian classroom.

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