Invoking the Divine on the Path to Inclusive Education: India's Contextual Realities

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Abstract

Understanding inclusive education challenges in India involves acknowledging the complex linguistic, cultural, religious, and caste-based diversity affecting marginalized groups. Ambiguity surrounds implementing the *inclusion* concept, necessitating critical evaluation and adaptation to align with India's unique dynamics. Despite increased enrollment (61%), concerns persist about omitting some children from inclusive education benefits, suggesting exclusivity. The 2020 National Education Policy aims for equitable opportunities, but challenges remain in implementation and access. Interchangeable terms (e.g., *inclusion* vs. *integration*) and a lack of differentiation hinder progress. Robust research on classroom practices is vital to establish effective strategies, support families, and address diverse student needs. This multifaceted issue requires consideration of India-specific contexts. India's interpretation of inclusive education varies based on disability severity, and solutions should account for political, historical, and cultural contexts and the beliefs and experiences of disabled individuals.

Keywords

inclusive education, India, National Education Policy, exclusion

One must acknowledge the intricate interplay of linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity and caste-based social and economic stratification to grasp the complexity around inclusive education in India. Socioeconomic disparities, exacerbated by caste-based limitations on access to resources and opportunities, shape the nation's social fabric. The Indian caste system (closely associated with Hinduism) comprises a hierarchical structure of four principal categories—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—alongside historically marginalized scheduled castes (Untouchables or Dalits) subject to severe discrimination. Religious diversity (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism), regional variations, and tribal communities (Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis) further contribute to the complex social differentiation. They pose ongoing challenges to equity and justice in Indian society despite constitutional provisions for affirmative action (Afsana et al., 2023).

In the context of disabled children and youth, Indian society views their disability as a problem to be fixed (Ghai, 2015) and perceives disabled people as "incomplete" entities (Ghai, 2012). This prevailing belief determines a child's success and worth by their ability to fit into established norms, such as excelling academically, securing a prestigious job, marrying at the right age, and fulfilling familial obligations (Meena & Ferose, 2021) despite societal barriers. Failing to achieve these milestones is often met with disapproval, skepticism, and possibly exclusion. These factors significantly complicate the educational journey of disabled people and multiply marginalized and minoritized groups, such as Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims, who face intersecting forms of exclusion and inequities (Grills et al., 2019).

Persons with disabilities (PWDs)—perceived as "abnormal"—experience stigmatization due to these ableist ideologies. Society frequently perceives disabilities as tragic, unfortunate, and sometimes associated with past actions (*karma*), blaming the individual or their parents for the disability (Ghai, 2015). This perception leads to sympathy or condescension toward PWDs. There also is a tendency to shy away from interacting with PWDs due to discomfort, lack of understanding, or fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. These obstacles collectively foster an environment where PWDs are seldom observed or included in the community.

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In 2015, the Government of India (GOI) attempted to reimagine disabled people in its citizenry's psyche and shift the deficit narrative. Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2015) in a national address, introduced the term _divyang_ to refer to PWDs. This term replaced _viklang_ (in official GOI communication), whose etymology combined two Hindi words: _vik_ (meaning deformity or disability) and _lang_ (meaning lacking or impaired). However, _divyang_ is a composite of the Hindi words _divya_ (divine or divine body) and _ang_ (limb or body part; Rai, 2022). By using _divyang_, the GOI aimed to emphasize the PWD's inherent strengths, abilities, and potential. However, _divyang_ sparked debates and criticisms within the disabled community (Panicker, 2019; Sarkar, 2020). Critics contend that elevating PWDs to a "divine" status perpetuates a hierarchical distinction between them and others (Mahanta, 2022; Singal, 2019). The term is overly euphemistic; it does not address systemic issues, barriers, challenges, or discrimination disabled individuals face and overlooks the need for structural changes and inclusive policies.

State of Inclusive Education in India

Until the 1970s, PWDs in India were educated in a separate, segregated system (Hodkinson & Devarakonda, 2009). In the 1980s, Mani, an Indian scholar of inclusive education (as cited in Singal, 2005), proposed a dual-teaching model wherein regular classroom teachers equipped with instructional materials and limited competency-oriented training "looked after" disabled children alongside their regular classroom responsibilities. For this, they received additional compensation. Singal (2005) noted that this understanding implicates inclusion as an extra task for which teachers are recognized and rewarded separately rather than one integral to their role. In addition, suggesting that teachers with limited training can merely "look after" disabled children fails to address the importance of effective teaching practices and the significance of learning for every child.

However, a significant shift occurred after India and other nations signed the Salamanca Declaration in 1994 (United Nations, 2021). Since then, the term _inclusive education_ has become ingrained in the Indian educational system's official rhetoric (Singal, 2006; Singal & Rouse, 2003). _Inclusion_, a "buzz-word" (Evans & Lunt, 2005, p. 41) in educational spaces, policy documents, media, and common parlance, is used interchangeably with _inclusive education_ and _integration_ (Singal, 2005). The literature highlights the ambiguity around conceptualizing and implementing _inclusion_ (e.g., Rose, 2017; Singal, 2005, 2006). The term is not native to India. It was embraced due to Western influences in the general and special education fields (Rose, 2017; Taneja Johansson, 2014), raising concerns about the concept's cultural appropriateness

and relevance within the Indian context. Based on these observations, Singal (2005) suggested critical evaluation and adaptation to align the concept with India's distinct cultural, social, and educational dynamics. She underscored the need to consider indigenous knowledge systems and local context while formulating and implementing inclusive education policies and practices.

Students With Disabilities in Inclusive Settings in India

An estimated 2.2% (26.8 million) of India's population has a disability (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019). Data sources (e.g., census and the National Sample Survey Organisation, 2003) rely on surveys of sampled populations and do not accurately estimate PWD in India. According to the 2011 census, about 2.13 million (1.05%) school-aged children are disabled. Recent data (UNESCO, 2019; Taneja Johansson et al., 2021) revealed that 61% of the disabled children aged 5-19 years attend educational institution, with the rate of school attendance of disabled children (5-19 years) higher in urban areas (65%) compared to rural areas (60%) [Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities India, 2021; Center for Disability Studies and Action, n.d].

Nevertheless, concerns have been raised that—despite adopting inclusive education policies and increasing the enrollment of students with disabilities in mainstream schools—"'inclusive education' in India [is] largely exclusive of children with a disability" (Grills et al., 2019). Disabled children face significant challenges accessing education past primary school; only 9% complete secondary education (Gupta, 2016). The literacy rate among PWDs is approximately 45%; less than 63% of PWDs aged 3 to 35 years ever attended a regular school. Children in rural areas with autism or cerebral palsy and girls with disabilities are the least likely to be enrolled (Singal et al., 2017). The enrolment rates for students with disabilities from minority groups such as Muslims dropped from 15.64% to 10.46%, for Scheduled Castes from 19.4% to 17.45%, and for Scheduled Tribes from 10.37% to 7.4% (Government of India, 2021).

The GOI faces a dilemma in reconciling international aid agencies' directives for inclusive education as a moral imperative with not alienating disability organizations and nongovernmental agencies operating segregated special schools—leading to a discrepancy between policy and practice. Although the GOI promotes its inclusion schemes (initiatives or programs), it also promotes segregation by assisting voluntary organizations' schemes (Alur & Bach, 2009). This dual-track system includes GOI-funded inclusive schools for children with mild and physical disabilities and GOI-funded or nongovernmental agency special schools for students with moderate/severe disabilities requiring

significantly modified curriculum. Although these separate tracks for disabled students contradict the Global North's concept of inclusive education, the GOI's recognition of the importance of educating students with disabilities is a significant step toward fostering inclusion (Kalyanpur, 2008).

Policy and Legal Underpinnings for Educational Services for Students With Disabilities

The 1986 National Policy on Education proposed a system to identify, diagnose, and assess disabilities. It would determine a student's placement in educational settings, categorizing them as suitable for "special"(segregated) or mainstream (general education) schools based on their disability severity. The policy also identified training, advocacy, and infrastructure reforms as goals to facilitate universalizing primary education for all students and increase inclusion of students with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 117). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) guarantees free compulsory education to all children aged 6 to 14 years. In 2006, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities mandated the inclusion of PWDs within the general education system, focusing on access to schools and resources. However, the policy did not specify whether disabled students could access curriculum, pedagogical strategies, and assessment options tailored to their needs (Ahmad, 2015).

The comprehensive Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD, 2016) mandated all educational institutions (government or private) to provide inclusive education and reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. In 2018/2019, the GOI actively launched Samagra Shiksha, consolidating educational policies from preschool through Grade 12. This program aimed to ensure equal schooling opportunities and learning outcomes by enhancing resource allocation, including identification, assessment, infrastructure development, assistive devices, and in-service pedagogy training for special and general educators (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Recent Advances and Breakthroughs in Policies in India

Policy Description

In July 2020, India introduced a new National Education Policy (NEP) reforming the education system and enhancing the quality of education provided to students. It emphasizes foundational literacy and numeracy for all students by Grade 3 and preprimary education, consistent with global perspectives on the importance of the early years (Muralidharan & Singh, 2021). The policy focuses on inclusive, equitable education for all, defining *inclusive*

education as an education system where students with and without disabilities learn together. It also recommends recruiting more special educators with cross-disability training and providing short-term specialized training for teaching children with disabilities in general teacher training programs (Sarkar, 2020). It highlights the importance of ensuring access to education for girls, students from marginalized communities, and PWD (Kumar et al., 2020).

Criticism

Although the NEP and RPWD provisions specifically address inclusion, scholars have critiqued their lack of social justice concerns, language ambiguity, and insufficient planning to implement the policies effectively. Rangarajan et al. (2023) underscored the presence of exclusionary measures within the NEP, contradicting its professed commitment to inclusivity. For instance, the policy categorizes constitutionally recognized marginalized groups into one category, and its establishment of "special educational zones" potentially further marginalizes these groups. Sarkar (2020) similarly highlighted inconsistencies in school choice in the NEP and RPWD. The NEP offers a choice of schools for students with disabilities: neighborhood schools, special schools, or home-based instruction audited under the RPWD (which does not endorse the home-based instruction option). The RPWD stresses the importance of building inclusive education systems but does not provide a clear picture of achieving inclusion with segregated alternative schooling options. Likewise, the NEP fails to provide clear governance or accountability mechanisms for home-based programs and special schools.

Although referencing the RPWD and emphasizing teacher training, the NEP neglects the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2019), which legally supports school inclusion and compulsory education. This omission suggests an incomplete understanding of inclusive education and improvement of school systems for marginalized students (Batra, 2020; Govinda, 2020). Despite specifying teacher training as a priority, the NEP fails to acknowledge systemic issues in training general education teachers within India's current programs. Given the vast shortage of teachers trained and qualified to work with PWDs, the proposed solution of short-term specialized training for all teachers is inadequate to meet the challenges of creating an inclusive educational space for students with various disabilities, especially significant disabilities (Sarkar, 2020).

Because the NEP is grounded in a human capital rather than a social justice approach, it has been criticized for not addressing structural inequities and barriers to education (Batra, 2020; Haragopal, 2020). Still nascent, the NEP needs a systematic implementation plan for effective support. Kumar et al. (2020) identified inadequate education expenditures, subpar private institutions without proper quality

checks, poor governance, and insufficient information and communication technologies as key barriers to effective implementation.

Laws such as the NEP and RPWD attempt to foster inclusive education, ensure equitable opportunities, and establish a supportive environment for PWD's education and growth. A core issue lies in confusing, interchangeable terms, such as *inclusive education*, *integration*, *rehabilitation*, *mitigation*, and *divyang*. Although the NEP espouses inclusion, it refers to "mitigation" in the learning disability context, highlighting its reliance on the medical model that seeks to cure a disability. This confusion reflects a failure to acknowledge significant differences between approaches (Sarkar, 2021). *Integration* expects disabled children to fit existing educational models (essentially, being "let in") and contexts retrofitted to accommodate PWDs almost as an afterthought (Balasubramanian, 2021). In contrast, *inclusion* signifies environments where everyone is valued for uniqueness, and educational contexts are designed proactively to meet all students' needs (Ahmad, 2015; Singal, 2005, 2019).

Summary of Research From India on Inclusive Education

Grills et al. (2019) suggested that despite India's efforts to make education a fundamental right for all children, inclusive education for PWDs faces significant challenges. They highlighted a negative correlation between disability and educational opportunities in India, where children with disabilities are more likely than their nondisabled peers to miss early childhood education.

Research on teacher concerns, attitudes, and readiness to meet children's needs in India's inclusive schools has garnered substantial attention, especially in recognizing the significance of teacher training to facilitate inclusion. Sharma et al.'s (2009) study revealed a shift in attitudes toward inclusion, although teachers expressed concerns about insufficient classroom resources. Bhatnagar and Das (2013) reported secondary school teachers' positive attitudes toward including students with disabilities in the classroom. Teachers who opposed inclusive education, particularly for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, justified their stance by highlighting the students' perceived cognitive differences and their own lack of pedagogical skills and appropriate curriculum materials to meet the students' needs (Kaushik, 2020).

A related challenge is the shortage of trained professionals (special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and teacher aides) to address the needs of children with disabilities adequately. Research in India highlighted that general education teachers' inadequate training in special education instructional methods, insufficient infrastructure, and large class sizes hinder the implementation of inclusive practices (Shah et al., 2016). Srivastava et al.'s (2015) study assessed the impact of a training program on teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and teaching methods related to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorders, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and dyslexia. The findings revealed positive improvements in all areas; participating teachers considered the training relevant and suitable for their practice.

Although most researchers in this field focus on urban communities, India's urban–rural divide is crucial in the persisting imbalance of educational opportunities (Agrawal, 2014) and educating disabled students. Limited infrastructure, lack of resources, and inadequate accessibility in rural areas significantly challenge inclusive education (Rose et al., 2021). Moreover, the growing emphasis on English as the primary instruction medium in schools further exacerbates disparities, disadvantaging individuals taught in their native language (Rose, 2017). Rural schools often struggle to provide necessary accommodations, specialized services, and trained staff to support disabled students. In addition, teachers' and community members' awareness and understanding of disabilities can be relatively low in rural areas.

Taneja Johansson et al. (2021) examined how government school teachers in India's rural general education classrooms perceive and address disabled children's needs within an increasingly diverse learner population. They indicated that teachers held deficit-oriented views but recognized the importance of inclusive education and were open to engaging with disability issues. However, teachers faced challenges in meeting diverse learner needs and, expressing concerns about their lack of preparedness and adequate support systems, tended to exclude children with disabilities. The study emphasized the urgent need for effective professional development programs and support structures to ensure quality education for all.

Misquitta and Joshi (2022) discussed the outcomes of a professional development program promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities. Questionnaires and audio-visual evidence indicated that participants successfully applied learned strategies to their classrooms, particularly appreciating the program's hands-on approach and contextually relevant resources. The authors stressed developing open education resources and broadening professional development programs to incorporate follow-up support.

Research on teachers and inclusive education in India often focused on quantitative measures and deficits, neglecting teachers' perspectives and broader institutional and policy contexts. Forber-Pratt and Sarkar's (2022) study took a different approach, exploring what is possible in inclusive education in Kolkata, India, specifically for girls with disabilities in a home and school for orphan girls. The authors highlighted teachers' perspectives on best practices and challenges within the larger institutional context through qualitative data analysis. The study emphasized the

inclusive practices' iterative nature and school leaders' support, underscoring the school's importance as a familial space challenging societal views on disability. The authors reported that teachers' development and involvement in inclusive practices increased self-awareness and confidence. However, considering India's contextual (e.g., sociocultural and historical) and relationship-building factors is crucial for replicating the model of the school in the study. Furthermore, the teachers' positive experiences can inspire better teacher preparation programs and further research on inclusive education.

Rangarajan et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study in a rural government school in remote Uttarakhand, India. Using a strength-based participatory approach, they incorporated capability and intersectionality to understand inclusive education. The findings (from students, parents, teachers, and the school leader) highlighted shared beliefs in the value of schooling, development of diverse capabilities, teachers' role in promoting social justice, and school as an equalizing space. However, consistent with the literature on teachers' perspectives and practices in India emphasizing barriers like discriminatory beliefs and limited engagement, they also identified adverse conditions hindering inclusive, equitable education.

Next Steps for Research, Practice, and Policy in India

Despite promising policy enactments, children with disabilities and from multiple marginalized backgrounds experience a paucity of services and exclusion from educational environments. This segment recommends possible next steps in research, practice, and policy.

Research

Incorporating local perspectives and contextually relevant approaches. International agencies like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) partly fund laws and policies influenced by and sometimes beholden to the values they impose. Local perspectives on inclusion are often overlooked, necessitating a shift toward culturally responsive practices (Kalyanpur, 2008). The need to consider localized, contextually relevant understandings of disability and inclusion is growing (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2016; Hodkinson & Devarakonda, 2009; Taneja Johansson, 2014). Sarkar et al. (2022) argued, "[A] theoretical foundation that appreciates culturally held values and local knowledge while addressing intersecting forms of exclusion and inequity in the Indian context" is missing (p. 82). They suggested DisCrit (see Annamma et al., 2018 for description) to broaden, evaluate, and scrutinize initiatives to conceptualize inclusive education rooted in the local context and culturally responsive practices. Inclusive education, they proposed, carries various challenges as it travels from the Global North to the Global South, emphasizing issues of inherent inequities, misapplication of special education principles, overreliance on the social disability model, and balancing neoliberal policy with social justice.

Need for research examining current practices. Besides a robust theoretical foundation, it is crucial to have a well-established body of research examining current classroom and school practices in the existing dual-track system. Such research establishes a foundation of existing practices and captures effective innovations. For instance, discussions and research on classroom practices occur before introducing or implementing policies in the Global North (Rose, 2017). Moreover, it would assist in offering targeted support and services to families and PWDs while providing a range of pedagogical approaches teachers could use to differentiate their instruction to meet diverse student needs.

Despite research examining teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion, little addresses how schools and teachers build or sustain inclusive practices. If equitable systems are to emerge, it is crucial to prioritize democratizing knowledge, actively involving marginalized individuals and communities and those working with them to drive change. This suggestion's rationale stems from the utility of studying educational interventions or initiatives situated, locally constructed, and continually adjusted by participants in a mutually engaging and interactive process (Kozleski, 2017). It allows researchers to excavate and situate practices in sociocultural contexts while highlighting culture's role in mediating the everyday lives of students, parents, and staff in these inclusive settings and classrooms (Balasubramanian, 2021).

Building and Sustaining Inclusive Practices

Addressing ableist assumptions via teacher education. Understanding and influencing how teachers and teacher candidates learn about disability is crucial to addressing ableist assumptions. Scholars have criticized the GOI's use of *divyang* (divine body) instead of *viklang* (cripple) as "othering" and promoting a charity approach with religious connotations (e.g., Sarkar, 2020; Singal, 2019). Similarly, Singal et al. (2017) reported that teacher discourse consists of "othering," thinking of children with disabilities as distinctly different from their typically developing peers. Teachers attributed the learning difficulties that disabled students face to factors such as lack of focus, low cognitive scores, and economically disadvantaged home environments and ascribed these challenges as the child's deficits. Instead, training programs for general education teachers must address disability in society. General education teachers'

perceptions of disability frequently mirror stereotypes and misconceptions in prevailing narratives. These culturally influenced *master narratives* consist of widely accepted beliefs about what is normal or desirable in society. They portray disability as a condition to be cured, eradicated, fixed, or overcome while presenting life with a disability as tragic, pitiable, and burdensome (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). This does not imply that the impairment is not real—but if we reconceptualize disability as the intersection of the individual and the environment, we can identify disabling contexts and address the barriers that society erects.

Using inclusive frameworks to design learning environments. Disability has tangible, material realities with a political identity grounded in resistance (Annamma et al., 2018). Countering ableist assumptions must be concrete; teachers must learn strategies, pedagogical skills, and opportunities for reflection and discourse. Current inclusion efforts focus primarily on integrating children into a system that already presents numerous barriers to access and participation (Singal, 2019). Instead, we recommend proactively redesigning the system's core to be inclusive and promote belonging for all. Educators should be trained in frameworks such as universal design for learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and other culturally sustaining and relevant practices (e.g., Hammond, 2014). Furthermore, teacher education should include more practice-based learning (Sharma et al., 2013) with reflexive disability inclusion training that equips educators with the theoretical and practical skills to teach diverse learners (Robinson, 2017; Sharma et al., 2013).

Building communities of practice. Preliminary studies evaluating UDL teacher training in India yielded promising results (Misquitta & Joshi, 2022). In-service teachers should receive opportunities for ongoing professional learning and local communities of practice with a shared vision for inclusion and collaborative teams relying on each other for problem-solving and knowledge generation (Balasubramanian, 2021; Mortier, 2020).

Policy Shifts

The NEP and RPWD are pivotal policies that have greatly shaped inclusive education in India in recent years. However, critics highlight core issues that must be addressed to implement inclusive practices effectively and meaningfully. The NEP must shift focus from a human capital approach to integrating social justice principles into all policy formulation and implementation aspects. Measures should be tailored to address the distinct needs of multiple marginalized groups rather than grouping them into one category, like "special education zones" (Rangarajan et al., 2023). Despite being welcomed for certain provisions, the NEP's ambiguity and absence of clear implementation directives raise concerns about how effectively it can achieve its stated goals (Muralidharan & Singh, 2021; Rangarajan et al., 2023). The NEP must accompany a concrete, comprehensive implementation plan outlining specific steps, timelines, and responsibilities for achieving its goals. Developing and executing effective strategies would require engaging stakeholders, including educators, researchers, and community members.

Inclusion is a multifaceted issue influenced by factors such as caste, gender, class, religion, and disability status. Acknowledging that the Indian interpretation of inclusive education differs based on the disability type and severity is essential. Effective solutions must consider political, historical, and cultural contexts; the beliefs of the populace at large; and the experiences of the disabled population (Kalyanpur, 2008).

Authors' Note

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In this article we use "people with disabilities" and "disabled people" to honor the diverse ways in which people identify with their disability.

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