



TRACING THE JOURNEY OF INDIAN EDUCATION FROM SEGREGATION TO INCLUSIVENESS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The Indian education system has undergone a significant transformation from historically exclusionary practices to a more equitable and inclusive framework. Traditionally, access to education was dictated by rigid social hierarchies, with marginalized communities-including Dalits, Adivasis, girls, and the economically disadvantaged-systematically denied educational opportunities. During the colonial era, education served elite interests, further entrenching social disparities. Post-independence, India initiated major constitutional and policy reforms aimed at democratizing education and bridging historical gaps. This paper employs a qualitative historical analysis, drawing upon primary and secondary sources such as policy documents, academic literature, and government reports, to trace this transition from 1947 to 2020. Key policy milestones-including the Kothari Commission, the National Policy on Education (1986/1992), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act (2009), and the National Education Policy (2020)-have progressively shaped a more inclusive system. The study argues that equitable and inclusive education is essential not only for development but also for realizing the ideals of social justice in a pluralistic democracy. While policy strides have been made, the realization of inclusive education in practice necessitates community participation, pedagogical innovation, and a shift in societal attitudes. Inclusion in education must ultimately serve as a foundation for nation-building and holistic human development.

Keywords: *Equity, Inclusive Education, Indian Education, Marginalized Communities*

Introduction

Education is widely regarded as the backbone of a society (Bhamare, 2025), serving as a vital instrument for national development and progress (Dey & Bika, 2023). In every field of society education plays a significant role in building a good nation (Mollick, 2024). Moreover, education is one of the most important aspects of child development (Maity & Sikdar, 2023). It plays a crucial role in fostering the holistic growth of children by nurturing their innate potential (Sjisbl, 2025). However, historically, the benefits of education have not been equitably distributed among all segments of society (Tilak, 1979; Ghosh, 2024). As a result, many children, especially those from marginalized communities have been deprived of opportunities for full personal and intellectual development (Ghosh, 2024). Recognizing the indispensable role of education in human life, various commissions, committees, and policy frameworks have been introduced in India over time to promote access to education for all individuals, especially children. Despite these efforts, several challenges have hindered their effective implementation, leaving gaps in educational equity and outreach. Another view education is the fundamental right of every citizen (Maity, 2021; Abrol, 2023). To address this, the Government of India took a landmark step by recognizing education as a fundamental right through the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002 (Pitaliya, 2021). This amendment introduced Article 21A into the Constitution, ensuring the right to free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of 6 and 14. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, enacted in 2009, gave effect to this constitutional provision and came into force on April 1, 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2015). Since then, a range of policy measures and reforms have been undertaken to transform the educational landscape-shifting it from a segregated model toward one that emphasizes inclusion, equity, and equal opportunity for every child (Vyas & Bano, 2015).

The journey of Indian education from a system rooted in segregation and privilege to one aspiring toward inclusivity and equity is both complex and evolving. Historically, education in India was stratified along the lines of caste, gender, class, and religion. In pre-colonial times, learning opportunities were largely limited to upper-caste males through institutions such as gurukuls and madrasas, with lower castes, women, and tribal communities facing systemic exclusion (Sharma, 2001). British colonialism brought new educational frameworks that were selectively accessible, primarily benefiting urban elites and further entrenching societal divisions. Macaulay's Minute (1835) and the Wood's Despatch (1854) are indicative of colonial efforts to create a class

of educated Indians for administrative convenience rather than universal education (Chakrabarty, 2000). While some missionary and reformist efforts targeted marginalized groups, widespread access remained elusive.

Post-independence India adopted a constitutional commitment to universal education. Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy mandated free and compulsory education for all children. Over decades, successive policies—from the Kothari Commission Report (1966) to the National Education Policies of 1986 and 2020—have emphasized equity and inclusion. However, disparities persist. Caste-based discrimination, gender biases, linguistic barriers, and economic challenges continue to affect the access and quality of education for millions. Inclusive education, as defined today, involves not just physical access but the meaningful participation of every learner, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, in the full range of educational experiences. This paper explores this transition, critically analysing India's journey from exclusion to inclusion, evaluating both policy progress and persistent gaps. It aims to unpack how inclusive education is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced within the Indian context.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it critically examines India's transformation from a segregated education system to one that aspires toward inclusivity and equity. By highlighting the historical roots of exclusion and evaluating current policy measures, it provides valuable insights into the progress and persistent challenges in achieving inclusive education. The findings can inform educators, policymakers, and researchers on the need for systemic reforms, inclusive pedagogies, and community engagement. Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader discourse on social justice in education and supports the realization of equitable learning opportunities for all, especially marginalized and underrepresented communities.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives-

- To study the historical evolution of education from segregation to inclusion in India.
- To critically analyse key policy frameworks promoting inclusive education.

Methodology

This study employs historical research design in the direction of qualitative approach (Biswas, 2021). Historical research or historiography, attempts to systematically recapture the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events, and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present (Berg & Lure, 2016). This study was conducted by documentary analysis method. The research was conducted using the method of documentary analysis, which involves examining official and personal documents as primary sources of data (Rana, 2024). Both primary and secondary sources were utilized, including educational policy documents, government reports, scholarly publications, and theoretical literature in education (Mollick, 2021; Biswas, 2021). Peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and publications from reputable organizations (e.g., UNESCO, OECD, World Bank) were prioritized to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings (Creswell, 2014). The analysis is interpretive and aims to understand how inclusive education has been conceptualized and operationalized over time, considering sociocultural, political, and institutional contexts. Thematic analysis was used to extract major trends, challenges, and policy implications. Thematic analysis is one of the most widely utilized methods for analysing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible framework for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within data-sets (Ahmed, et. al., 2025).

Historical Evolution of Education in India: From Segregation to Inclusion

❖ Ancient and Pre-Colonial Era

Gurukul System: Early Indian education was characterized by the gurukul system (Gupta, 2020), where students, regardless of social status, could approach a teacher for learning. However, access was still influenced by caste and gender hierarchies, with Brahmins and upper-caste males dominating formal education. Notably, there were exceptions—some women and lower-caste individuals became scholars, but these were rare.

Buddhist and Jain Influence: Buddhist monasteries and universities like Nalanda and Taxila promoted more inclusive education, admitting students from diverse backgrounds, including international scholars. Yet, overall, education largely remained a privilege for the elite.

❖ Colonial Period: Institutionalized Segregation

British Reforms: The British colonial administration introduced Western-style schooling, emphasizing English, science, and mathematics. This system marginalized traditional Indian education and reinforced social divisions, as access to modern schools was limited to affluent and upper-caste boys. Girls, lower castes, and marginalized communities were largely excluded.

Segregation by Gender and Caste: The British institutionalized gender segregation in schools, a practice not widespread in pre-colonial India. Caste-based exclusion persisted, with education for Dalits and other marginalized groups severely restricted.

❖ Early Steps Toward Integration

Social Reform Movements: Reformers like Jotirao Phule and G.K. Gokhale advocated for the education of oppressed classes and women, challenging exclusionary practices. The Indian National Congress and other groups began demanding universal education as a right.

Constitutional Provisions: After independence in 1947, India’s Constitution directed the state to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to age 14 (Article 45). However, implementation was slow, and literacy rates remained low, especially among disadvantaged groups.

❖ **From Segregation to Inclusion**

A. Integration and the Beginnings of Reform (1970s–1990s)

Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme launched in 1974 was India’s first formal attempt to mainstream children with disabilities by providing support for their inclusion in regular schools (Sahani & Patel, 2023). However, the focus was largely on physical placement rather than systemic reform, and the burden of adaptation was placed on the child rather than the school.

National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 marked a further shift, advocating for the integration of children with mild disabilities in ordinary schools and recognizing education as a right for all children (Dey & Bika, 2023).. This period also saw broader efforts to expand access for disadvantaged castes and girls, with government schools playing a key role in democratizing education, though quality and resources often lagged behind.

B. Legislative Milestones and Rights-Based Approaches (1990s–2000s)

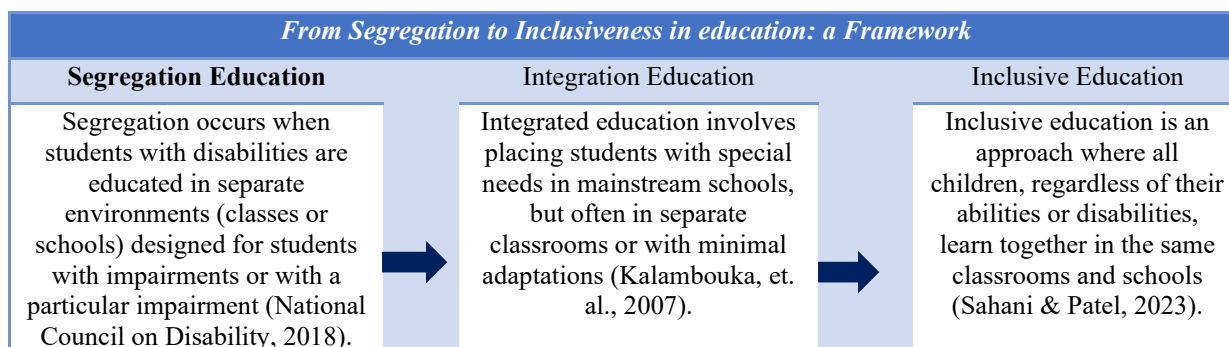
Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), which mandated integrated education and marked a shift toward recognizing the rights of children with disabilities. This Act proclaimed equal opportunities, full participation, and protection of the human rights of children with disabilities (Dey & Bika, 2023).

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2000, was a flagship program aimed at universalizing elementary education and included provisions for inclusive education.

Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 further cemented education as a fundamental right for all children aged 6–14, mandating free and compulsory education and emphasizing the inclusion of marginalized groups.

C. Towards Inclusion: NEP 2020 and Contemporary Developments

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents the most recent and comprehensive push towards inclusive education. It emphasizes the integration of children with disabilities and other marginalized groups into mainstream schools, curriculum reform, teacher training, and the use of technology to bridge gaps. The policy aims to move beyond physical integration to meaningful participation, addressing persistent challenges such as societal stigma, inadequate infrastructure, and teacher preparedness.



India’s journey from segregation to inclusion in education has been gradual, shaped by evolving social attitudes, legislative reforms, and policy innovations. While significant progress has been made-especially in recognizing education as a right and promoting inclusive practices-challenges remain in translating policy into practice, ensuring quality, and overcoming deep-rooted social barriers.

<i>Key point of Segregation, Integration, Inclusion Education</i>			
Aspect	Segregation	Integration	Inclusion
Placement	Separate schools	Same school	Same classroom
Curriculum	Different	Same as others	Adapted to all needs
Teaching Method	Specialized, isolated	Standard	Differentiated and flexible
Attitude toward learner	Deficit-based	Tolerant but limited	Valuing diversity
Goal	Separation	Assimilation	Equity and participation

Key Policy Frameworks Promoting Inclusive Education in India

Inclusive education in India has evolved through various policy initiatives that aimed to transform the educational landscape from one of segregation and marginalization to one of equity and inclusion. From the post-independence constitutional vision to the transformative National Education Policy (2020), the Indian state has engaged in a gradual expansion of rights and access for marginalized communities, particularly children with disabilities, girls, and socially disadvantaged groups.

Policy/Document	Year	Key Provisions for Inclusive Education	Critical Analysis
Kothari Commission Report	1964-66	Advocated common school system, equal opportunity, and removal of disparities (Alur, 2002).	First policy recommendation on reducing social segregation in education. Implementation remained uneven and urban-biased.
National Policy on Education (NPE)	1986	Emphasized integration of disabled children into mainstream schools, equalizing educational opportunity.	Shifted focus to integration, but lacked inclusive teacher training and infrastructure; often led to tokenism.
Programme of Action (PoA)	1992	Recommended district-level plans for integrating children with special needs, especially girls and SC/ST children.	Emphasized community-level implementation, but success depended on local governance quality. Weak monitoring mechanisms.
Persons with Disabilities Act	1995	Mandated non-discrimination in education, access to curriculum, and infrastructure for children with disabilities.	First legal backing for inclusive education; however, implementation was weak due to poor awareness and inadequate funding.
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)	2001	Aimed for universal elementary education with Inclusive Education for Disabled at Elementary Level (Dey & Bika, 2023).	Major step forward; provided decentralized, flexible models. Yet, faced criticism for overburdened teachers and lack of trained special educators.
Right to Education (RTE) Act	2009	Ensured free and compulsory education to all children aged 6-14; emphasized non-discrimination and inclusion of disadvantaged groups.	Landmark act ensuring rights-based framework. However, children with severe disabilities were excluded under the original provisions until later revisions.
National Policy for Persons with Disabilities	2006	Advocated inclusive education across all levels with appropriate support and teacher training (Abrol, 2023).	Focused specifically on persons with disabilities; yet coordination with mainstream education departments remained a challenge.
Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act	2016	Provided detailed mandates on inclusive education, reasonable accommodation, and inclusive curriculum design.	Strong legislative push aligning with UNCRPD; however, practical gaps persisted in rural and under-resourced schools.
National Education Policy (NEP)	2020	Envisions inclusive and equitable education with focus on gender inclusion, socio-economic disadvantage, and universal access.	Holistic and future-oriented; yet execution requires structural reform, investment in capacity building, and inclusive pedagogy.

While India's policy trajectory has moved from segregation to integration and now toward inclusion, each phase has revealed gaps between policy intent and ground realities. Early frameworks either ignored or inadequately addressed the needs of children with disabilities and other marginalized groups. Later policies, though more inclusive in language, often fell short in implementation due to resource limitations, lack of training, and persistent societal attitudes. NEP 2020 offers a holistic and ambitious vision, but its success depends on bridging the gap between policy and practice through sustained investment, capacity building, and robust monitoring mechanisms.

Barriers and Enablers of Equitable Educational Access in Contemporary India

India's commitment to equitable educational access is reflected in constitutional guarantees and various national policies. However, despite significant progress, achieving equity in education remains a complex challenge shaped by several interrelated barriers and enablers.

Socio-Economic Inequality: Poverty remains a major barrier to education. Children from low-income families often face poor nutrition, lack of school supplies, and pressure to work, which hinders regular attendance and learning.

Caste and Social Discrimination: Despite legal safeguards, caste-based prejudice continues in many rural and semi-urban schools, leading to the exclusion or mistreatment of Dalit and Adivasi students (Nambissan, 2009).

Gender Disparities: Girls, particularly in rural areas, face challenges such as early marriage, household responsibilities, and safety concerns, which often lead to school dropouts.

Geographical Barriers: Remote and tribal regions often lack adequate schools, qualified teachers, and learning materials, making access to quality education extremely difficult.

Disability and Accessibility Issues: Children with disabilities frequently encounter physical and pedagogical barriers, including the absence of inclusive infrastructure and trained special educators.



Language and Cultural Disconnect: The dominance of non-local languages in instruction can alienate children from tribal or minority linguistic communities, affecting comprehension and retention.

While India has made significant policy strides, overcoming entrenched social biases, economic inequalities, infrastructural deficits, and digital divides is essential to achieve truly equitable and inclusive education for all learners.

Discussion

This study critically analysed the evolution of key policy frameworks promoting inclusive education in India from 1947 to 2020. The analysis reveals a clear trajectory from early neglect and segregation toward a more comprehensive and rights-based approach emphasizing inclusion. Initial education commissions and constitutional provisions laid the foundation for universal education but failed to address the specific needs of children with disabilities and other marginalized groups (Kohama, 2012). The Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme of 1974 marked the first government attempt to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schools (Sahani & Patel, 2023), yet its limited scope and poor implementation underscored the challenges of shifting from segregation to integration (Azam, et. al., 2024). The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and its Programme of Action (1992) represented a progressive step by advocating integration for children with mild disabilities and incorporating special education into teacher training. However, the policy’s continued endorsement of segregated special schools for children with severe disabilities reflected persistent systemic barriers and societal attitudes (Kohama, 2012). The Persons with Disabilities Act (1995) and the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002) further strengthened the legal framework by recognizing education as a fundamental right for children with disabilities, culminating in the Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009), which mandated free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14 years.

Despite these legislative advances, implementation challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, and social stigma have limited the realization of meaningful inclusion (Nagpal, 2023). The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the National Action Plan for Inclusion (2005) attempted to address these gaps by emphasizing systemic changes and support services, but their impact was uneven across regions. UN convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) acknowledged the inclusion of student’s rights of all by providing them individual support they may require (Abrol, 2023). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a paradigm shift by adopting a holistic and inclusive framework that integrates access, equity, curriculum reform, teacher training, and technology use to foster meaningful inclusion (Thanganadar, et. al., 2025). However, the success of NEP 2020 depends heavily on effective implementation, adequate resource allocation, and addressing deep-rooted societal barriers. The policy underscores the government’s vision to craft an education system that aligns with the 21st century’s demands, emphasizing equity, access, quality, afford ability, and accountability (MHRD, 2020; NCERT, 2020). While India has made significant policy strides toward inclusive education, the persistent gap between policy and practice highlights the need for sustained efforts in capacity building, infrastructure development, and attitudinal change to achieve true educational inclusion. Inclusive Education plays an important role as it will enhance a child’s ability to learn and it will also encourage the child to pass on the knowledge that he or she has acquired (Sahani & Patel, 2023). Education for children with disabilities has moved on from segregated education to inclusive education (Vyas & Bano, 2015).

<i>Shifting Paradigms in Indian Education from Segregation to Inclusive Approaches</i>		
Aspect	Policy Context	Reason for Shifting Frameworks
Segregated Education	Policies focus on separate provisions for children with disabilities, often under special education laws that isolate resources and services.	Segregation perpetuates inequality and limits opportunities for social participation and academic achievement.
		
Integrated Education	Policies promote placement of children with disabilities in mainstream schools but often lack enforcement of accommodations or systemic changes.	Integration improves access but does not fully address systemic barriers or promote genuine inclusion.
		
Inclusive Education	Policies emphasize rights-based frameworks (e.g., UN CRPD), mandating accessibility, non-discrimination, and systemic reform to support all learners.	Inclusion aims to create equitable learning environments that reflect democratic values and social justice.

This view highlights that the shift from segregated to integrated to inclusive education is not just about where children learn but reflects deep changes in policy, societal values, and educational practices. True inclusion demands commitment at all levels—from legislation and school leadership to teachers and families—to overcome entrenched barriers and create equitable learning environments.

Recommendations for Achieving Truly Inclusive and Equitable Education in India

Achieving truly inclusive and equitable education in India requires a multi-pronged and systemic approach that goes beyond policy declarations to practical implementation. The following recommendations aim to strengthen inclusivity and equity across the Indian education system:

Strengthen Teacher Training and Sensitization: Teachers play a central role in inclusive education. Pre-service and in-service teacher training must include modules on inclusive pedagogies, classroom diversity management, gender sensitivity, and teaching children with disabilities or from marginalized communities. Regular workshops and exposure to real-life inclusive practices can build empathy and effectiveness.

Localize Curriculum and Language of Instruction: Children learn best in their mother tongue, especially in early education. Incorporating local languages, indigenous knowledge systems, and culturally relevant content into the curriculum can bridge the gap between home and school environments and foster better engagement.

Invest in Infrastructure and Accessibility: Many marginalized learners still study in under-resourced schools lacking basic amenities. Adequate infrastructure—such as accessible toilets, ramps for children with disabilities, proper classrooms, and digital tools—must be ensured in all schools, particularly in rural and tribal areas.

Bridge Digital and Technological Gaps: With the increasing use of technology in education, it is essential to provide equitable access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy for disadvantaged learners to prevent widening the learning divide.

Promote Community Participation and School Governance: Strengthening the role of School Management Committees (SMCs), parents, and local community leaders helps in understanding local barriers and ensuring accountability. Inclusive education thrives when the community is actively involved.

Data-Driven Monitoring and Targeted Support: Disaggregated data on enrollment, attendance, and learning outcomes by gender, caste, disability, and region should be used to identify gaps and tailor interventions accordingly. Support systems like special educators, counsellors, and mid-day meals should be enhanced for vulnerable children.

Implement Equity-Focused Policies with Adequate Funding: The implementation of NEP 2020 and RTE must be backed by adequate budgetary allocations, clear timelines, and mechanisms to reach the most excluded.

Ultimately, inclusive and equitable education must be seen not only as a legal or policy mandate but as a collective ethical responsibility to ensure every child learns, thrives, and contributes meaningfully to society. By integrating these strategies, India can advance toward an education system that genuinely embraces diversity, promotes social justice, and offers equitable learning opportunities for all children.

Conclusion

India's educational journey from segregated access to striving for equity and inclusion reflects both significant progress and ongoing challenges. Constitutional guarantees and landmark policies like the Right to Education Act (2009) and the National Education Policy (2020) have expanded access and emphasized inclusive learning for marginalized communities. The National Education Policy 2020 marks a significant milestone in India's education system, aiming to transform the country's educational landscape (Thanganadar, et. al., 2025). However, persistent issues such as socio-economic disparities, caste-based discrimination, infrastructural gaps, and the digital divide continue to limit full inclusion. To realize the vision of equitable education, it is essential to strengthen policy implementation, enhance teacher training in inclusive pedagogies, and invest in digital infrastructure. Moreover, fostering community engagement and dismantling systemic biases remain critical. By addressing these challenges holistically, India can move closer to an education system that offers truly inclusive and quality learning opportunities for all learners, thereby contributing to social justice and national development. It is only through sustained efforts and a collaborative approach that we can achieve this goal and create a truly inclusive and equitable education system in India (Dey & Bika, 2023).

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