INCLUSIVE EDUCATION UNDER NEP 2020: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS IN ODISHA

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Abstract: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a paradigm shift in Indian education giving emphasis on inclusivity, equity and holistic development. Inclusive education provides opportunities to visually impaired students to participate fully in mainstream schooling and society. Odisha, a state with significant socio-economic and geographical diversity, faces both unique opportunities and persistent challenges in implementing inclusive education for visually impaired learners. This paper critically examines the scope of NEP 2020 in fostering inclusive education in Odisha, highlights structural and pedagogical challenges and suggests strategies for effective implementation. The study argues that inclusive education for visually impaired students must be supported by strong policy translation, assistive technology integration, teacher preparedness and societal awareness to achieve meaningful inclusion.

Key Words: Inclusive Education, NEP 2020,Visual Impairment, Odisha, Equity, Challenges

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a model where all students, including those with disabilities, diverse backgrounds or minority languages, learn together in the same classrooms within their local schools, rather than in segregated settings. It requires the education system to adapt to the diverse needs of all learners by making necessary changes to the curriculum, teaching methods and physical environment to ensure everyone has equal access, full participation and support to succeed.

Inclusive education is not only about placing children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms; it represents a systemic transformation to ensure meaningful participation, equity, and empowerment. The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, launched after three decades of NPE (1986) emphasizes access, equity, quality, and accountability. It visualizes an education system based on the principles of equity and inclusion, recognizing the rights of children with disabilities as integral to the educational mainstream.

In India, children with visual impairment comprise a significant portion of learners with special educational needs. According to the **Census 2011**, visual impairment accounts for nearly 20% of total disabilities in India, with Odisha reporting a substantial share. Despite constitutional guarantees and legislative measures such as the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016,** visually impaired students continue to face structural barriers in accessing quality education.

This article explores how NEP 2020 can serve as a catalyst for transforming the educational landscape for visually impaired learners in Odisha. It reviews the opportunities provided by NEP 2020, critically analyzes implementation challenges and suggests a roadmap for effective inclusion.

II. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND NEP 2020: A FRAMEWORK

NEP 2020 clearly emphasizes inclusive education through:

i. Equity and Access

Inclusive education emphasizes that every child, irrespective of socio-economic background, gender or disability, must have equal opportunities to learn. NEP 2020 highlights equity as a core principle to reduce systemic barriers such as financial constraints and social discrimination (Ministry of Education, 2020). Ensuring universal access fosters social justice and prepares learners for equal participation in society (UNESCO, 2017).

ii. Curriculum Flexibility

A flexible curriculum allows multiple pathways to learning that address diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles. NEP 2020 recommends vocational integration, skill-based options and local relevance in curriculum design (Ministry of Education, 2020). Recent studies from Odisha suggest that flexibility empowers students with disabilities to pursue learning aligned with their strengths and aspirations (Sarkar, 2023).

iii. Teacher Preparedness

Teachers are central to inclusive classrooms and specialized training is necessary for them to adopt inclusive pedagogy. Research from Odisha shows that many teachers lack exposure to inclusive practices, highlighting the urgent need for continuous professional development (Mohanty & Nanda, 2017). Professional training in differentiated instruction and the use of assistive technologies enhances classroom inclusivity (Besan & Rajhans, 2025).

iv. Technology Integration

Digital platforms, ICT tools and assistive technologies help to bridge learning gaps for students with disabilities. NEP 2020 promotes digital learning as a key strategy for equity, while UNESCO (2020) underscores the importance of assistive technologies such as screen readers and accessible e-content. In Odisha, challenges remain in infrastructure and teacher readiness but ICT holds transformative potential (Sahoo, 2024)

v. Special Educational Zones

NEP 2020 calls for Special Educational Zones with resource centers and inclusion cells to support differently-abled students. These zones can serve as hubs for specialized teaching, counseling, and rehabilitation services, complementing mainstream education (UNESCO, 2009).

NEP 2020 calls for the establishment of Special Educational Zones with resource centers and inclusion cells to support differently-abled students. Odisha-based studies show that lack of dedicated resource facilities remains a major hurdle in implementing inclusive education effectively (Das & Paltasingh, 2024). Such zones can serve as hubs for specialized teaching, counseling, and rehabilitation services, complementing mainstream education (UNESCO, 2009).

vi. Monitoring and Research

NEP 2020 highlights the need for robust data systems and regular policy monitoring to strengthen inclusive education. UNESCO (2020) recommends evidence-based monitoring, while NEP 2020 advocates stronger research and policy review mechanisms. Localized research in Odisha highlights gaps in data systems and calls for systematic evaluation of inclusion initiatives (Dash & Sahoo, 2025).

These provisions align with the global mandate of the **UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4)** – "inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all."

III. OPPORTUNITIES UNDER NEP 2020 FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS IN ODISHA

i. Strengthening of Inclusive Framework

NEP 2020 advocates mainstreaming children with disabilities in regular schools. In Odisha, where many visually impaired children remain in segregated special schools, this represents an opportunity to ensure equity.

ii. Use of Assistive Technology

The NEP 2020 underscores the integration of digital and technological interventions as a means to advance inclusive education. For visually impaired learners in Odisha, this creates avenues for the adoption of screen readers, tactile graphics, Braille e-books, and Odia-compatible applications. These initiatives are pivotal in reducing the accessibility divide and fostering equitable participation in the learning process.

iii. Teacher Education and Professional Development

NEP 2020 advocates restructuring teacher education programs to integrate inclusive pedagogical practices. For Odisha, this is crucial as many teachers lack adequate preparation to support visually impaired learners. Strengthening professional competence through training and capacity-building initiatives can enhance the quality of inclusive education.

iv. Localized Curriculum and Multilingual Education

Considering Odisha's rich linguistic diversity, NEP 2020 emphasizes curriculum adaptation to promote learning in the mother tongue. For visually impaired learners, localized assistive materials in Odia and tribal languages can enhance comprehension and retention. Such initiatives ensure cultural relevance while advancing inclusive and equitable education.

v. Focus on Equity and Access for Marginalized Regions

The NEP 2020 emphasizes targeted interventions for socio-economically disadvantaged groups to ensure inclusive education. In Odisha's tribal districts, the intersection of poverty and disability creates compounded barriers for visually impaired learners. Focused support through accessible resources, trained teachers, and community-based initiatives is essential to bridge these gaps.

vi. Skill Development and Vocational Training

NEP 2020 highlights the importance of vocational education as a pathway to employability. For visually impaired students, this focus equips them with livelihood skills suited to their abilities. Such training fosters economic empowerment and greater social inclusion.

vii. **Integration of NGOs and Community Participation**

The policy opens scope for collaborations with NGOs, civil society and private players. In Odisha, NGOs such as the **National Association for the Blind (NAB), Open Learning Systems (OLS) and Voice of World** already contribute to digital literacy and inclusive education and can scale up their efforts under NEP 2020.

IV. CHALLENGES

Following challenges are faced in Implementing Inclusive Education for Visually Impaired Students in Odisha.

i. **Infrastructural Deficits**

Many schools in Odisha, particularly in rural and tribal regions, lack **ICT facilities, Braille libraries or resource rooms.** There is still a wide gap in access to digital resources.

ii. **Limited Teacher Preparedness**

Despite NEP's focus, most teachers in Odisha are untrained in inclusive practices. There is limited awareness about **Braille, screen readers, tactile teaching aids** and differentiated pedagogy.

iii. **Language and Content Gaps**

Since most assistive software is in English, the lack of Odia-compatible screen readers and learning materials limits accessibility for students.

iv. **Affordability and Accessibility**

Assistive technologies such as **refreshable Braille displays or advanced software** remain expensive. Families in rural Odisha, often with low socio-economic status, cannot afford them.

v. **Policy-Practice Disconnect**

Though policies exist, their translation into practice is weak due to lack of **monitoring, accountability and financial support** at the school level.

vi. **Social and Cultural Barriers**

Stigma, lack of awareness among parents and community misconceptions about disability continue to hinder the education of visually impaired children.

vii. **Inadequate Higher Education Access**

Transition of visually impaired learners to higher education becomes difficult due to limited support systems, inaccessible digital platforms and lack of counseling.

V. SITUATING ODISHA UNDER NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Worldwide, inclusive education is now being put into practice. Countries like those in Scandinavia and Canada show how visually impaired learners can be integrated successfully through universal design for learning and strong assistive technology systems.

In India, states like Kerala have advanced in ICT-based inclusive education. Odisha, however, is still in transition-policies are in place but practical implementation is limited.

The challenges are compounded by Odisha's socio-economic realities, including high tribal population, rural backwardness and digital divide. Yet, the state has a strong network of NGOs, special schools and community organizations, which can be **utilized effectively**. NEP 2020 provides a structural framework; what is required is **contextual adaptation, localization of technology and community ownership.**

VI. WAY FORWARD

i. Teacher Education and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Teacher education programs in Odisha should integrate compulsory modules on inclusive pedagogy to prepare educators for diverse classrooms. Continuous workshops on assistive technologies, Braille literacy, and digital accessibility are essential to enhance teachers' competence.

ii. Development of Odia-Compatible Assistive Technologies

Partnerships among the Odisha government, universities, and technology firms are needed to design Odia-based screen readers and accessible digital tools. Such innovations will provide visually impaired students with inclusive learning resources in their mother tongue.

iii. Infrastructure Development

ICT-enabled inclusive resource centers should be set up in every district to support the learning needs of visually impaired students. Schools must be equipped with Braille printers, audio libraries and tactile learning aids to ensure accessible education.

iv. Financial Support and Subsidies

Government schemes should provide free or subsidized assistive devices to reduce the financial burden on visually impaired students. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models can be leveraged to mobilize additional resources for inclusive education.

V. Community and Parental Engagement

Awareness programs must be organized to reduce stigma and encourage active parental involvement in children's learning. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can play a vital role in supporting the educational needs of visually impaired students at the community level.

vi. Monitoring and Research

State-level monitoring cells should be established to track the implementation of inclusive education initiatives. Periodic research on the learning outcomes of visually impaired students will help identify gaps and guide evidence-based policy reforms.

vii. Pathways to Higher Education and Employment Accessible digital platforms should be ensured in universities to support inclusive learning for visually impaired students. Skill-based programs and vocational training must be promoted to foster employability and long-term economic independence.

VII. CONCLUSION

The NEP 2020 provides a historic opportunity to mainstream visually impaired students into India's educational journey. For Odisha, with its unique socio-economic challenges, the policy offers both possibilities and hurdles. While the framework is progressive, its success depends on **robust implementation, localized innovations and multi-stakeholder collaboration.** True inclusion will not be achieved by policies alone, but by creating environments where visually impaired learners feel empowered, supported and capable of realizing their full potential.

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