

Inclusive Education as a legal Right: Implementation of the RPWD Act, 2016 in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Inclusive education is considered as a legally enforceable right in India which falls under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, which is based on the principles of accessibility, equality, participation and non-discrimination. This paper adopts a rights-based outlook to inspect the implementation of inclusive education requisite of the RPwD Act in Arunachal Pradesh, a geographically hilly, remote, socio-culturally vibrant and diverse state. By observing and considering secondary sources and policy evaluation, the study assessed how vaguely guarantees under Sections 3, 4, 16, and 17 are implemented into practice. Various persistent obstacle were observed such as shortage of trained teachers, inaccessible infrastructure, limited assistive resources, weak coordination between inter-department and social stigma, which collectively hinder the accomplishment of educational rights for children with disabilities. Simultaneously, with emerging efforts in disability identification, collaboration between inter-sector, and policy awareness provides scope for improvement. The paper persuades that effective implementation needs institutional accountability, context-sensitive planning, and a change toward a child-centric, rights-driven approach of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, RPwD Act 2016, Disabilities Rights, Arunachal Pradesh, Educational Accessibility, Challenges, Rights based approach

INTRODUCTION

Education is the most vital means for social development and transformation. In current knowledge-based world, it acts as the foundation for comprehensive and sustainable growth. In regard to achieve this goal, it requires ensuring ‘compulsory education for all,’ including persons with disabilities. The philosophy of inclusive education is derived from idea of ‘education for all children’, which advocates that every child - regardless of class, caste, gender, or disability - should have access to quality education alongside their peers. The main objective is to eliminate educational disparities and providing equitable opportunities for all.

Although terms like inclusion, mainstreaming and integration constantly appear in the discussion of special education, their meanings vary across cultures, surroundings, and countries. Hence, Inclusion is not a universal model rather it is a context and culture specific approach. For example, in regards of developed countries, the objective of inclusive education is primarily on integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools. Whereas, in most of developing nations, inclusive education extends

to the wider obstacle of integrating large numbers of economically and socially deprived children from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds into the educational system. According to Madan Mohan Jha, “Removing barriers and bringing all children together in school irrespective of their physical and mental abilities, social and economic status, and securing their participation in learning activities leads to the initiation of the process of inclusive education” (Sadana & Singh, 2023). Inclusion is not just restricted to children with disabilities but it extends to all learners who encounter obstacles in education. Whether developed or developing country inclusive education should be comprehended as an ongoing procedure of transition rather than a fixed outcome. It is characterized by constant effort to ensure that diverse learners - irrespective of their abilities, background, culture, language, family background, interests, or learning styles - are worked out by teaching strategies that address one’s individual needs. Education is an important tool for the overall development of every individual, which is reason why the right to education has been recognized in numerous international declarations, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. In India, for past five decade effort have been made by government aimed toward ensuring a extensive range of educational services especially for children with disabilities. In particular, in 1974 the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) was introduced aimed to provide equal opportunities in general schools and to assist their retention. Globally, inclusive education has surfaced as a critical issue in educational dialogue. Subsequently with the release of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 by UNESCO, many developing countries started to reframe their policies aimed to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools (Burman, 2024, p. 164). The concept of Inclusive Education has attained importance over the past few decades, especially in recent times, where strong emphasis are being advocated for education of children with diverse needs alongside their peers. Inclusive Education refers to an educational system in which children with or without disabilities learn and take part together in the same classrooms. It is a process which focuses at addressing and answering to the diverse needs of all learners by improving participation in learning, culture and community, along with reducing exclusion from and within education process.

This strategy needs changes and adaptations in teaching methods, curriculum, school structures, and method, guided by an insight that encompasses all children of the appropriate age group. It is established on the belief that the responsibility of educating all children resides within the prevailing education system. The basic and most important part of Inclusive Education ensure access to quality education for every learner by fulfilling their diverse needs in a respectful, responsive and supportive approach.

In real world, it includes providing learners with opportunities to take part in common learning surroundings, together with the necessary support to eliminate obstacles and barriers that might otherwise lead to exclusion. The principle of Inclusive Education was first adopted at the *World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality* (1994) and later reaffirmed at the *World Education Forum*. (Burman, 2024, p. 164).

Inclusive Education can be defined as a method of finding and addressing the diverse learning needs of all learner by minimizing obstacles within the learning environment. It portray a transition from segregated framework of education to an integrated approach im which children with disabilities and learning difficulties are educated alongside with their peers under one roof. Bottom line of Inclusive Education aims to restructure school cultures, practices and policies, to showcase the diversity of the communities they suffice. In contemporary times, the concept of inclusive education has further expanded beyond students with disabilities to include all learners who may get deprived in various ways.

Following India signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007, the proceeding of enacting new legislation to replace the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 (PWD Act, 1995) was initiated in 2010 to align along with national law and the provisions of the UNCRPD. After comprehensive consultations and drafting exercises, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act, 2016) was passed in parliament by both Houses and was notified on December 28, 2016, after getting Presidential assent.

The guiding principles of the Act emphasize on integral dignity and respect for individual free will, including the autonomy of choices and the freedom of persons with disabilities. It emphasizes genuine participation and inclusion in society, non-discrimination, respect for disagreements and acknowledging one's disability as an integral part of human diversity and encouraging humanity. Besides, it also upholds the principles of equality of opportunity, accessibility, gender equality and respect for the growing potentials of children with disabilities, including their right to preserve and protect their identity.

This legislation shows a crucial change in the approach towards disability - from being perceived primarily as a subject of social welfare to being recognized as a fundamental human rights issue.

SPECIFIC PROVISIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The RPwD Act, 2016 comprises several provisions for children with disabilities that need the emphasis of regular classroom teachers, special educators and other professionals involved in child's education.

- Section 3 of the act directs competent authority to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy the right to equality, life with dignity and respect for his or her integrity equally with others. The provision is essentially applicable to school administration with reference to children with disabilities
- Section 4(2) provides that competent Government and local authorities shall ensure that all children with disabilities shall have right on an equal basis to freely express their views on all matters affecting them and provide them appropriate support keeping in view their age and disability. It means the that school administration is not only expected to include students with disabilities in the process of decision making affecting them such as decisions regarding their sitting arrangements, designing and implementation of Individualized Educational Programmes etc.
- There is a possibility of abuse, violence and exploitation of children with disabilities in special and inclusive school settings. Section 7(1) provides legal remedies available against such incidents.
- Chapter-III of the act is devoted to educational provisions for children with disabilities. Section 16 of the chapter provides that all the recognized educational institutions including private schools provide inclusive education to the children with disabilities. In order to meet this objective, the institution should:
 1. Admit them without discrimination;
 2. Provide facilities for sports and recreation;
 3. make building, campus and various facilities accessible;
 4. provide support services to optimize their social and academic development;
 5. ensure most appropriate languages, modes, and means of communication for the blind, deaf and deaf-blind individuals;
 6. early identification and intervention for children with specific learning disabilities;
 7. monitor participation, progress and attainment levels of children with disabilities;
 8. provide transportation facilities to the children with disabilities and also the attendant of the children with disabilities having high support needs.

- Section 17 prescribes the following measures to implement Section 16 of the act:
 1. To conduct a survey of school going children in every five years to identify children with disabilities;
 2. to establish an adequate number of teacher training institutions;
 3. to train professionals and staff to support inclusive education;
 4. to establish an adequate number of resource centres to support inclusive education;
 5. to provide books, other learning materials and appropriate assistive devices to students with benchmark disabilities free of cost up to the age of eighteen years;
 6. to provide scholarships to students with benchmark disability; and
 7. to make suitable modifications in the curriculum and examination system;
 8. Due to financial constraints, many states may find it difficult to implement the provisions made in section 16 and 17 regarding inclusive education. (RPwD Act, 2016)

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 plays crucial role in Arunachal Pradesh, especially in the field of education. It call for inclusive and equitable education for children with disabilities, assuring their right to free education up to the age of 18 and fostering their participation in mainstream schools along with required support services. In a state like Arunachal Pradesh, the primary hinderance in access to education are geographical barriers and lack of resources, the Act gives a legal framework in order to strengthen early identification, accessibility, teacher training and provision of special educators. With shifting of perspective from welfare to rights, the RPwD Act plays a vital role in guiding programs and policies that are aimed to create inclusive classrooms and minimize educational exclusion of children with disabilities in the state.

Objective of the study

1. To examine the provisions of the RPwD Act, 2016 related to inclusive education in India
2. To identify the major challenges in implementing inclusive education under the RPwD Act, 2016 in Arunachal Pradesh

Statement of the problem

In spite of the enactment of the *Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016*, which aims to provide a extensive legal framework to ensure inclusive education for children with disabilities in India, the actual implementation of its provisions in grassroot varies across different regions of country. With respect to Arunachal Pradesh, challenges like geographical barriers, lack of trained educators and limited infrastructure persist, limiting the vision of inclusive education in the state.

Despite the mandate for equal access to reasonable accommodation, quality education and the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools in the RpwD Act, there is a substantial gap between policy and actual practice. Various reasons like many schools struggle with insufficient resources, little awareness among parents and teachers and poor coordination among government departments are responsible.

Hence, there is a need to analyse the specific provisions of the RPwD Act, 2016 related to inclusive education and to identify the major obstacles hampering its effective implementation in Arunachal Pradesh. By understanding various issues, it will help in working out practical strategies to strengthen inclusive education and ensure that the rights of children with disabilities are endorsed in both policy and practice.

Literature Review

Kumar & Kumar (2018) The article “*RPwD Act, 2016 and School Education: Concerns and Challenges*” gives an thoughtful overview of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, highlighting its shift to social model from a medical disability. It elucidate key provisions related to inclusive education, accessibility, and teacher training alongwith identifying various challenges such as limited resources, inadequate infrastructure and lack of trained educators. The paper strongly links legal and educational perspectives, stressing the need for stronger implementation and awareness. It also offers a valuable grounds for understanding the Act’s implications in India’s school education system.

Lalmuankimi & shree (2023) in the paper “*Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 in Inclusive Education*” gives a comprehensive review of research on the implementation of the RPwD Act in encouraging inclusive education. Its well ordered studies involved students, teachers, parents and administrators, featured challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited infrastructure, and little parental awareness. The paper stressed the requirement for practical teacher preparation, supportive learning atmosphere and cooperation among stakeholders. The study provides valuable insights into how inclusive education policies function in practice and emphasized the importance of awareness and training for successful implementation of the RPwD Act, 2016.

Swain & Sarangi (2024) The article “*Inclusive Education in India: Prospectus, Challenges and Research Priorities*” gives a extensive outline of the philosophy, policy framework and practical implementation of inclusive education in India. It establish link between constitutional provisions, international conventions, and national programs such as NEP 2020 and Samagra Shiksha to the objective of impartial education. The strength of paper lies in its comprehensive discussion of teacher preparation, classroom practices and gap in research. By featuring systemic challenges like teacher shortage, limited infrastructure and attitudinal barriers, it asks for coordinated efforts between educators, communities and policymakers.

Moond & Ahmad (2025) The paper “*Aligning National Education Policy (2020) with RPwD Act (2016) for Inclusive and Quality Education in India*” comprehensively reviews how NEP 2020 correlate the RPwD Act 2016 in encouraging inclusive education. It features the collective objectives of accessibility, equality and flexibility in education for children with disabilities. The study recognize main barriers such as limited infrastructure, inadequate teacher training and weak implementation mechanisms that hamper the accomplishment of policy goals. The strength of paper rest in its policy assessment and practical recommendations, stressing the need for stronger capacity building, regulation and stakeholder commitment to make inclusive education from policy vision into classroom reality.

Research Question

1. What are the key provisions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 related to inclusive education in India?
2. What are the major challenges in implementing inclusive education under the RPwD Act, 2016 in Arunachal Pradesh?

Research Methodology

For this paper, secondary sources in the form of articles have been consulted.

Analysis

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 mandates all schools to take measures toward

an inclusive, disability responsive and barrier-free education system. Although India has made legislative allegiance with the SDG 4 and UNCRPD, practical grassroots implementation remains inconsistent. According national datasets such as UDISE+ there is less than one-third of schools nationwide that have basic accessibility features, only about 30% of schools have accessible toilets and below 35% of teachers have received training in inclusive education (Das & Sarkar, 2025) showing systemic significant gaps at the grassroots level. Above barrier confirms a compliance-oriented approach rather than genuine inclusion. Additionally in Arunachal Pradesh, the challenges like are geographical, administrative, and socio-cultural factors makes it more difficult. The state still does not have dedicated government-run schools for children with multiple disabilities, apart from the Donyi Polo Mission School for the Hearing and Visually Impaired (Arunachal Times, 2024). Acknowledging this void, the state government recently announced plans to establish five dedicated schools for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in following districts Kameng, Lohit, Siang, Subansiri, and Tirap, quoting 2,989 identified CWSNs in UDISE+ 2023–24. Although this is a promising commitment, however it also highlights how far the state is from attaining system-wide inclusion.

Administrative and inter-departmental restraints remain the main challenge. The Governor of Arunachal Pradesh has underlined the dire need for compulsory appointment of special educators, particularly in the primary schooling years. At present, though some appointments were made under Samagra Shiksha, the number of special educators still remains way below requirement adding to inconsistent classroom support. Frequent reports from families about denial of admission, shortage of trained teachers and absence of structured government operated therapy and support centres, compelling many to rely on expensive private run facilities, an option not viable for low-income households.

Attitude barriers plays major role in how state creates exclusionary experience. Parents of autistic children often reports about stigma, non-acceptance and lack of awareness in mainstream schools, reflecting national research showing constant deficit-oriented perceptions among peers and teachers. The Governor urged for strong sensitisation programmes for the Departments of Education, Social Justice, Health and Women & Child Development to discourage stigma and improve frontline capacity.

Infrastructure still remains most prominent challenge. State's hilly and steep terrain along with dispersed settlements makes deployment of resource educators, establishment of accessible facilities extremely difficult (Arunachal Times, 2024). Poor road connectivity makes it hard for children with disabilities in attaining regular attendance, especially those who need mobility support or escort services. The geographic restraint somewhat explains the fall in enrolment at upper-primary and secondary levels, also national UDISE+ data shows little improvement in primary-level enrolment.

However, recent developments in state also direct toward potential progress. The proposal to set up five special schools, the Governor's advocacy for state managed model special schools, adherence to UDID registration expansion and conduct disability assessment camps, and the proposal to institutionalize PhD programmes on autism shows positive political will. The collaboration of Health Department, APSCPCR and rehabilitation centres in organized disability assessment and dialogue between various stakeholder indicates emerging inter-sectoral cooperation.

In order to move from fragmented to systemic inclusion, Arunachal Pradesh must orient its efforts along with national and global evidence. Steps should be taken towards adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL), investment on teacher professional development should be done, steps towards expanding availability of assistive technologies, and embedding strong monitoring and accountability system within Samagra Shiksha. Making community sensitisation stronger, transforming transportation support system

and enlarging the special educator number, especially at primary stages - are necessary for translating the RPwD Act's directives into significant educational access.

Though, Arunachal Pradesh have taken meaningful initiatives toward inclusive education recently but notable gaps still prevail in attitudinal acceptance, infrastructure, teacher capacity and administrative cooperation. To minimize these gaps need long-term, planned investment and transition from policy rhetoric to sustained and rights-based implementation.

Despite all the challenges and barriers, Arunachal Pradesh hold potential for strengthening inclusive education under the RPwD Act, 2016. The government recently proposed to establish five dedicated schools for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) intent a crucial shift toward institutionalizing disability-responsive education. Governor's directives show growing policy attention on appointing special educators, improving accessibility quality and enlarging disability assessment drives programmes indicates increasing political and administrative commitment.

Development in inter-departmental cooperation among the Departments of Education, Health, Social Justice, and Women & Child Development further strengthen the scope for collaborated service delivery. The growth of UDID registration process, construction of rehabilitation centres, and increasing civil society involvement (faith based organisation, APSCPCR, NGOs) generate opportunities for extensive early identification, parent counselling, and community sensitisation.

Arunachal Pradesh can slowly transform from fragmented to a systematic and sustainable model of inclusive education if reinforced with continuous teacher training, culturally responsive pedagogies along with targeted investment in assistive technologies, aligned with national priorities like NEP 2020 and global frameworks such as SDG-4.

Conclusion

Under the RPwD Act, 2016 inclusive education is both legal mandate and a moral imperative. Yet in Arunachal Pradesh, obtaining the vision of complete inclusion remains challenging due to geographical hindrance, infrastructural limitation, insufficient teacher preparation and persistent attitudinal barriers. According UDISE+ 2023–24 data there is declining enrolment numbers at higher grades, showing that physical access, classroom support and retention mechanisms remain poor.

Though policy documents weigh on equality, reasonable accommodation and child participation, the void between legislation and implementation is notable. So far, recent initiatives such as the plans for special schools, enhanced disability assessment camps and endeavour to strengthen inter - sectoral cooperation, shows positive signal. In order to achieve authentic inclusion, the state must switch from a compliance-oriented approach to a child-centred, rights based and system-wide strategy.

Therefore, in Arunachal Pradesh inclusive education stands at a critical phase though challenges remain substantial, but the windows for transformation are promising if backed by sustained political will and community participation.

Recommendations

Some essential measures that are needed to strengthen inclusive education in Arunachal Pradesh are:

1. Strengthening Early Identification and Assessment

Multidisciplinary assessment teams should be established in district level, intensify developmental screening in primary schools and Anganwadi centres and make sure that timely referrals to suitable rehabilitation services are done.

2. Teacher Training should be professionalised and expanded

There should be compulsory disability inclusive pedagogy in pre-service B.Ed. and D.El.Ed. programmes and continuous in-service training to general teachers, resource teachers and school leaders should be provided.

3. Improvement in Infrastructure and Accessibility

There should be basic barrier-free infrastructures in school such as ramps, accessible toilets, tactile paths, assistive technologies and accessible learning materials in accordance with RPwD Act norms.

4. Measures to address Attitudinal and Cultural Barriers

Programmes such as regular awareness campaigns, community sensitisation workshops and school-based inclusion programmes to minimize stigma and encourage a positive outlook toward children with disabilities.

5. Improve Inter-Departmental Coordination

Strengthen relation between various department such as Education, Social Justice & Empowerment, Health, and Women & Child Development departments in order to streamline services such as screening, rehabilitation, and educational support.

6. Periodical Monitoring and Accountability of Institutions

There should be clear accountability frameworks, time to time school audits and transparent reporting system to monitor adherence with inclusive education guidelines and provisions under the RPwD Act, 2016.

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