

# **Inclusive Education in Crossroads: Issues and Challenges**

**Mrs. Mary & Dr. Sybil Thomas**

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## **Children with Disabilities**

“Neglected, Marginalised are common in knowledge world. We are not the sources of problems. We are the resources that are needed to solve them. We are not expenses, we are investments. We are the children of the world and despite our different backgrounds we share a common reality. We are united in our struggle to make the world a better place for all.”

*Ms. Gabriela Arrieta -Opening address at the UN Special Session on Children, May 2002.*

This is a world where approximately 120 million children are not enrolled in primary school. In this paper it is highlighted that the potential for education to reverse the negative effects of social exclusion. There are an estimated 30 million children out of school in India (MHRD statistics, cited in World Bank), many of whom are marginalised by dimensions such as poverty, gender, disability, and caste. While many educational programmes have attempted to reach out to these previously excluded children, those with disabilities are often forgotten, emphasising their invisible status in a rigidly categorised society.

## **The Goal of This Paper**

This paper aims to present a case study of the current status of inclusive education in India with a focus on children with disabilities. The paper argues that a twin-track approach to disability may assist not only in improving educational access for marginalised children, but also the reconceptualization of inclusive education as a school quality issue to benefit all children. This could contribute in the long-term towards the achievement of Education For All and fulfilment of the Fundamental Right to Education enshrined in the Constitution of India in 2002.

## **Disability, a development**

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The World Health Organisation estimates that 10% of any population is disabled. In addition, approximately 85% of the world's children with disabilities under 15 live in developing countries. It is further thought that with disability, or impairment, being both a cause and consequence of poverty, the Millennium Development Goals cannot be achieved without a specific disability focus. People with disabilities have health, nutritional, educational and gender needs too, yet the goals related to these issues currently ignore the often unique needs of people with disabilities within these goals. The WHO estimates that up to 50% of disabilities are preventable, with 70% of blindness and 50% of hearing impairment in children in developing countries being preventable or treatable (DFID, 2000). Although this can be seen as more of a health issue than a disability politics one, its link to healthcare, malnutrition and poverty makes disability a development issue.

### **Inclusive education - What is it?**

Until recently, most conceptual literature on inclusive education was Northern (European and North American) in origin, taking a 'whole-school' approach to institutional change (Peters, 2004), and influenced by the social model of disability. Children in special schools were seen as geographically and socially segregated from their peers, and the initial movement to vocationally integrate these students in mainstream schools ('integration') shifted to one where the whole school was encouraged to become more adaptable and inclusive in its day-to-day educational practices for all students ('inclusive education'). Pedagogy in particular was highlighted as the key to meeting all students' educational needs by making the curriculum flexible, and so more accessible. By recognising that teaching methods which can make curriculum accessible to children with disabilities can also make learning accessible to all students, a teacher or school principal is well on the way to improving the overall quality of their school. In this way, inclusive education is not a disability-only issue, but an educational quality issue.

There is a growing, although not comprehensive, literature in the south (developing nations), which focuses more on external factors with its 'community approach'. In developing contexts with large numbers of out-of-school children, inclusive education tends to be more broadly concerned with school access and education deprivations for marginalised groups such

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as girls, ethnic minorities, poor families and disabled children in CREATE zones one and two, who have never attended or dropped out of school. It seems that there is currently an expanding discourse on inclusive education developing amongst some academics and teaching professionals in India, many of whom, like Mike Oliver (1996), see inclusive education as exclusively concerned with children with disabilities. This discourse is attempting to shift perceptions of disability from the medical model to the social model. However, there are many conceptual difficulties with the terms of integration and inclusion in India, which are often used interchangeably (ibid). Further, varying definitions of disability and subjective interpretations of what ‘type’ of child a teacher is willing to include in their classroom add to the confusion.

Even if a previously excluded child is given access to a mainstream classroom, what happens within that space can be anything but inclusive if the school quality is poor, they cannot access an inflexible curriculum, or they are ignored or bullied by the teacher or their peers. These children would be found in CREATE zone three. Tomasevski highlights how “...education is widely – albeit wrongly – perceived as inherently good. Getting all children to school is thus mistaken for their right to education.” It is worth noting that the concept of inclusive education in the mainstream as opposed to specialist segregated provision is a matter of heated, inconclusive debate in the north, and yet it is seemingly being transferred unquestioningly as the panacea to the exclusion of children with disabilities in the south.

While in northern contexts (developed nations), the discourse around inclusive education is primarily concerned with segregation as opposed to inclusion in the mainstream, in the south the coverage of special schools is so limited that the discourse is concerned with inclusion being potentially the most cost and time-efficient way of improving access to educational institutions. It may be that the promotion by the World Bank and OECD of the cost-effectiveness of inclusion in the mainstream enabling both economic and social benefits may bear more relevance for resource-constrained governments and policy-makers than a child-rights approach.

Although inclusive education clearly has the potential to improve teaching and learning processes for all children as well as fulfilling their rights, for the purposes of this paper we will

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be looking at inclusive education mostly in terms of access for children with disabilities in India due to their ‘invisibilisation’.

### **Proportion**

India has the second largest education system in the world, with 200 million children aged between 6 and 14, around 25 million of whom are out of school. However, bearing in mind that apparently only 35% of children are registered at birth, others estimate between 35 to 80 million out-of-school children.

When considering understanding of, approaches to, and impacts of inclusive education, the inevitable diversity and complexity in a context of this size must be taken into account. India’s 1.3 billion people speak 18 different languages (GOI, 2002), and 844 dialects, worship varied religions, have unique customs, differ in their exposure to disease and access to types of nutrition which affect their health and socio-economic status, and also communications which influence their access to government resources such as education or healthcare.

### **Conceptual understandings of Inclusive Education in India**

Although it may not be appropriate to judge the adoption of a northern concept in the south from a northern perspective, hasty use of such globalised terminology without engaging with the thinking behind it may present no more than empty rhetoric, whatever the context. Singal clearly perceives inclusive education as “...a concept that has been adopted from the international discourse, but has not been engaged with in the Indian scenario.” Many interviewees concurred with the opinions reflected in government documents that inclusion is about children with special needs, as reflected by a disabling condition. A handful of others argue that inclusive education should not be limited to children with disabilities, as it holds relevance for all marginalised groups.

Indian understandings of disability and educational needs are demonstrated through the interchangeable use of several English terms which hold different meanings in the north. For example, children with special needs or special educational needs tend to be perceived as children with disabilities in India, as demonstrated by Mukhopadhyay and Mani’s views on ‘Education of Children with Special Needs’ in a NIEPA government-funded research report,

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which solely pertains to children with disabilities. In contrast, the intention of Mary Warnock's term 'special educational needs', coined in the UK in 1978, was to imply that any child, with an impairment or not, may have an individual educational need at some point in their school career (e.g. dyslexia, or language of instruction as a second language) which the teacher should adapt to. This further implies that a child with a disability may not have a special educational need while their able-bodied peers could.

In addition, despite the 1987 Mental Health Act finally separating the meaning of learning disability from that of mental illness in India, there is still some confusion in understanding, with the 1995 Persons with Disabilities Act listing both mental retardation and mental illness as categories of disability. Ignorance and fear of genetic inheritance adds to the societal stigma of both. 'Inclusive' and 'integrated' education are also concepts that are used interchangeably, understood as the placement of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, with the provision of aids and appliances, and specialist training for the teacher on how to 'deal with' students with disabilities. There is little engagement with the connotations of school, curriculum, and teacher flexibility for all children. These rigid, categorical interpretations of subtly different northern concepts are perhaps a reflection of not only the government tendency to categorise and label but also a cultural one, most explicitly enforced through the rigidly categorised caste system.

While it is easy to criticise the apparent lack of critical engagement with these terms in India, this is perhaps a reflection of the weakness of local disabled people's organisations' (DPOs) political voice which have had such an overt influence on the development of these concepts in the north. It may also reflect an unwillingness to engage with an understanding of social exclusion and the, "...barriers to entry and participation in the education system faced by children due to reasons other than impairment". However, it is worth noting that this political discourse has a 40 year plus history in the north, while it is relatively new in the south.

### **Government Programmes**

Over the years, although government programmes such as Operation Blackboard and Lok Jumbish focused mainly on infrastructure, girls, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe children,

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others had, or have, inclusive education components which ensure the visibility of children with disabilities.

### **Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC)**

The Ministry of Welfare, now Social Justice and Empowerment, implemented the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme from 1974 to 1982, when it transferred to the Department of Education. The scheme was apparently intended to encourage co-operation between mainstream and special schools in order to support integration, although Julka believes this co-operation did not happen. Singal too, argues that the programme is seen as an overall failure by those outside the government. Unfortunately, I was not able to access literature exploring these failures further, reflecting the need for valid and reliable data to enable improved project planning in the future. IEDC has been replaced by the Integrated Education for the Disabled (IED) component of the national District Primary Education Project (DPEP), and supports community mobilization and early detection, in-service teacher training, architectural design in schools (Mukhopadhyay, nd), the establishment of resource centres, teacher training, identification and assessment of children with disabilities, and the supply of specialist aids and appliances.

### **Project on Integrated Education for Disabled (PIED)**

In 1987, UNICEF and the government-funded National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) launched the Project on Integrated Education for Disabled (PIED) in 10 blocks (the administrative level between district and village (Thomas, 2005b)), that focused on teacher training in order to encourage integration. PIED was later amalgamated with the DPEP and SSA (see below) and by 2002 extended to 27 States.

While enrolment of children with disabilities in the mainstream increased and retention was high, coverage has been “miniscule” with only 2-3% of children with disabilities integrated in mainstream institutions. Criticisms made in the project evaluation pointed to implementation issues, such as children getting financial assistance who were not classified as disabled, or teacher training courses being un-regulated . However, the design of the project which encouraged continued labelling of children and withdrawal of those with disabilities from

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particular activities in school was not highlighted. Further, despite aiming to deliver learner-centred teacher training courses, much of the course instruction was found to be traditionally formal hence failing in one of its key objectives of instigating change in pedagogy through teacher training.

### **District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)**

The 1995 District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), funded 85% by Central government via a World Bank loan and support from the European Community, UNICEF and the UK and Netherlands governments, and 15% by the State governments, focused on the universalisation of primary education, particularly for girls. The intention was for district-specific planning to make the programme contextual, and for participatory processes to empower and build capacity at all levels (GOI, 2002). However, Kobayashi found that the programme focused on quantitative targets and educational administration capacity-building more than participation, hence failing to empower local communities, unlike Lok Jumbish. Children with disabilities were included with the aim of achieving EFA. Extensive construction led to the creation of 200,000 new schools, and a teacher-training component led to the in-service training of all teachers. Alur argues that there were failures not so willingly reported such as corruption in the form of budgets for non-existent non-formal education centres, tribal dropout, the difficulty of multigrade teaching in one-teacher schools, low learning achievement, and no integration for children with disabilities due to continued reliance on special school systems. However, it is arguable that the existence of special school systems does not necessarily obstruct locational integration in the mainstream. Due to a lack of data, it is not possible to confirm how many children with disabilities were, or were not, integrated under the auspices of DPEP.

### **Janshala**

This community schools programme, started in 1998 and now replaced by SSA, was collaboration between the Government of India and the UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, the ILO, and UNFPA, and supported the government drive towards universal primary education. It covered 120, mainly rural, blocks in 9 States where there is evidence of low female literacy, child labour, and SC/ST children not catered for under DPEP. Unfortunately, due to limited

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availability of data, it is not possible to elaborate on any issues arising on the Janshala programme, which has a component designed to improve the attendance of difficult to reach groups of children, including children with disabilities.

### **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is the government's millennial Education For All umbrella programme for all education schemes, which aims to universalise elementary education. The goals are that all children aged 6-14 i) will be in some form of education by 2003, ii) will complete 5 years' primary education by 2007, and iii) will complete 8 years' education by 2010 (GOI, 2002). Disability indicators are included in the government agreement for SSA, although what exactly these are and whether they are taken on at local level is unclear. In fact, although one of the official SSA objectives is the enrolment of children with disabilities, the World Bank, SSA project appraisal does not list disability as a key indicator, unlike gender, SC and ST.

The fact that there are still many children out-of-school in 2006 demonstrates not only how behind this programme already is, but also how over-ambitious the infrastructure-led SSA goals were in the first place. For example, of the 1 million new classrooms that should have been built by 2007, there are only 300,000; 100,000 of which are not fully functional. Part of the "compelling" rationale for World Bank assistance to SSA was the continuous monitoring and evaluation and the "built-in accountability mechanism at the school and community levels". With donor support of the government feedback system, it was hoped that, "the development of mechanisms to assure cross-state and cross district observation, dialogue, and learning for program refinement could be among SSA's most enduring features.". However, despite an awareness of SSA lagging so far behind in the achievement of its intended targets, there is apparently no sign of accelerated political momentum to lend a sense of urgency to the task. This is perhaps a reflection of there being "...no condition of effectiveness" in the World Bank interest-free loan contributing towards the funding of SSA.

With a planned central, state government budget ratio of 85:15 changing to 50:50 in 2007, there is a high risk of some states not being able to afford to finance the programme, and perhaps an accompanying weakening of political will and programme implementation. The lack

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of political voice of the poorest people this programme is intended to assist, further pushes education to the lower strata of politicians' agendas. While criticism from the Indian media may be justified and necessary to raise awareness, it remains to be seen whether SSA will be able to adapt and become more effective over the next four years.

### **Civil society-response**

There are many international, national, and local NGOs involved with disability issues in India. Many local NGOs, while diverse and widespread, tend to be based on a charity/welfare approach and informed by the medical model Hooja, cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2003). Although the exact number is unknown, there are at least 2,000 NGOs and voluntary organisations actively engaged in education, of which the government funded 701 with grants in aid in 2010.

NGOs are perceived by the government as widening the implementation network and bringing flexibility and innovation into education programmes. In fact, they are currently implementing much of the IEDC scheme, as the job of including children with disabilities in education nationwide is too vast for the government to be able to undertake alone. NGOs "are important stakeholders in social development programmes and are also a repository of knowledge of grassroots realities because of their proximity to the people". While demonstrating an awareness of the advantage of NGOs' closeness to the people, there is no hint of criticism of the government not being so, or why. In fact, it seems to assume and accept government distance in a nation of hierarchies. While failing to criticise the power processes that make the government need grass-root NGO assistance in the first place, this can also be understood as a pragmatic, honest approach, with the government admitting its failings and resource constraints by embracing NGOs. However, when part of the MSJE's mandate is the: "...promotion and development of voluntary effort on subjects allocated to this Ministry," one of which is the "education, training, rehabilitation and welfare of the physically and mentally handicapped", it can only serve to reinforce the charity/welfare approach that sustains a medical, deficit model of disability.

Many national and local NGOs support special institutions, perhaps because it is easier to raise public support for residential centres than the promotion of inclusive education. However, a

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NGO that combines both specialist and inclusive aims is the National Association for the Blind. With branches nationwide, the NAB facilitates integration with skill and resource support. While it can be criticised for its roots in the medical model, it is important to remember that the specialist support they provide can assist with literacy (through Braille) and mobility (with a cane) for the mainstream classroom and beyond.

Some NGOs have metamorphosed their specialist institutions into resource centres in order to support inclusive education. For example, the Spastics Society of India (SSI) advocates for better understanding that many children with cerebral palsy do not have learning disabilities. The head office has also become a 'National Resource Centre for Inclusion' funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, CIDA for all children marginalised from learning, including girls and working children, operating inclusive pre-school classrooms in Mumbai's slum areas. In addition, they offer a postgraduate diploma in inclusive education among other courses, in order to clarify this much-misunderstood concept. However, SSI's impact is currently mostly limited to the cities of Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai. Similarly, the Jesuit-run Divine Light Trust for the Blind near Bangalore has become a resource centre to train teachers in mainstream schools in order to encourage the inclusion of blind children in their classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

The teacher education focus of some government programmes is perhaps going in the right direction. However, the apparently slight regard for content and methodology of the courses, which do not reconceptualise IE or address attitudes towards disability, demonstrates the need for further change in this context. Also, teachers are not the only stakeholders involved. Students, parents, administrators and local government officials are affected too, all of whom will see any innovation or new concept in a different light. However, the reconceptualization of IE as whole school issue appears to be essential if IE is to be more than physical relocation of children with disabilities in a mainstream classroom.

While only 2.5-6% of the population may have a disability, with approximately 98% of children with disabilities not attending any type of educational institution, the current provision (specialist or mainstream, government or NGO) is clearly not enough to attain EFA. This may

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partly explain why inclusive education is perceived by some as inevitability rather than a policy preference, because resources cannot stretch to the number of special schools and specialist teachers that would be needed to cater for this excluded group. However, although children with disabilities are unlikely to suffer from only one exclusionary dimension, they are often excluded from programmes for girls, or SC, ST or OBC students, further reinforcing their marginalisation from society. Human resource potential aside, without education marginalised children may not be able to fulfil their rights as citizens in the largest democracy in the world.

This suggests that the twin-track approach advocated by DFID, may be a constructive way forward for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the Indian education system. While some programmes could focus specifically on educational provision for children with disabilities, others could mainstream disability alongside gender and other exclusionary dimensions such as poverty. This would ensure the inclusion of all in programmes intended to widen the impact of institutional systems such as education. With the development of much-needed research into the inclusive education discourse and the implementation and outcomes of IE policy, reconceptualization of inclusive education as a whole school quality issue for all children may be able to grow alongside this merging of agendas. Thus, EFA and the Fundamental Right to education for all children as declared by the 86th Constitutional amendment in 2002 may be fulfilled in the long-term through the improved implementation of inclusive.

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