Aligning National Education Policy (2020) with RPwD Act (2016) For Inclusive and Quality Education in India

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a transformative step in India's education system, aiming at promoting inclusivity and equity. This policy seeks to provide accessible education for children with disabilities, aligning with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016). The NEP (2020) emphasizes flexible curricula, vocational training, and accessible learning environments. However, challenges such as insufficient teacher preparation, curriculum adaptation, and implementation issues persist. Despite these hurdles, NEP's commitment to inclusivity is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), calling for enhanced execution strategies to ensure a barrier-free education system.

Keywords: NEP 2020, RPwD Act 2016, Inclusive Education, Accessibility, Teacher Training, Assistive Technology, Implementation Gaps.

Introduction

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a comprehensive rethinking of the country's education architecture, emphasizing foundational learning, flexibility, vocational pathways, and central equity and inclusion. The policy explicitly references children with special educational needs and persons with disabilities and calls for an education system that is accessible, flexible, and responsive to varied learning needs. At the same time, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016) provides a legal framework that guarantees the right to education and requires reasonable accommodation and barrier-free access in educational settings. Conceptually, NEP 2020 and the RPwD Act share the same objectives: to dismantle exclusionary practices and to secure equal educational opportunities for persons with disabilities. However, having coherence at the level of policy language does not guarantee successful operationalization: implementation at scale requires trained personnel, adequate funding, infrastructure upgrades, robust administrative coordination, and measurable accountability mechanisms.

Recent literature and policy analyses thus highlight a critical question: how well does NEP 2020 translate RPwD's statutory obligations into practicable, resourced, and measurable actions across India's diverse educational landscape?

Review of Literature

The extant literature on NEP 2020 and inclusive education in India can be grouped into three thematic strands:

1. Conceptual alignment and policy intent.
2. Implementation challenges (teacher capacity, curriculum and assessment reform, infrastructure, and assistive technology).
3. Emergent opportunities (technology, community models, and targeted funding instruments).

Conceptual Alignment and Policy Intent

Several analyses suggest that NEP 2020 aligns well with RPwD Act 2016 in endorsing individualized support, inclusive curricula, and vocational pathways for learners with disabilities. Shelke, Singh, Baral, Biniwale, and Kumar (2024) show that higher education institutions have begun integrating modern technological tools and flexible policies to include differently-abled learners, though implementation remains patchy. "Inclusion of Differently Abled Students in Higher Education through Modern Technology," 2024 and the ShodhKosh review of assistive technologies show similar alignment regarding policy drafting, recognizing the importance of assistive supports. (Soni & Singh, 2024)

Implementation Challenges
Empirical studies reveal pronounced gaps:

Teacher preparedness: Despite NEP's emphasis on improving teacher education, many pre-service and in-service programs do not provide sufficient training in differentiated instruction, inclusive pedagogy, assistive technology use, or Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). (Tiwari, 2024; Mangat, 2024)

Digital and physical infrastructure disparities: The digital divide remains acute for learners with specific learning disabilities (SLD). For example, the systematic literature review by Sahrawat & Shahi (2025) highlights access issues for online tools, connectivity, and adaptive learning materials in rural and semi-urban areas. Physical school infrastructure often lacks universal design features.

Lack of standardized institutional regimes: There is considerable variability across states in how schools adapt curricula, assessments, and materials to be accessible. Some state boards and schools lag in adopting guidelines or receiving funding tied to accessibility compliance. (NEP implementation reports; "Delhi DoE mandates inclusive practices…" 2024)

Opportunities and Emerging Practices

Assistive Technology (AT) as enabler: Mandal, Ruidas, & Gope (2025) document numerous cases where AT (adaptive software, AAC, screen readers) improves engagement and academic participation for physically challenged and disabled pupils.

Policy developments: The proposed Assistive Technology (Standards & Accessibility) Rules, 2025, by the Government of India, aim to streamline classification, procurement, standardization, and grievance handling of assistive devices. (Government of India, 2025)

Localized innovations: NGOs and community-based organizations are developing inclusive resource centers, low-cost digital content, locally relevant language materials, and teacher peer networks to share good practices.

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the alignment between NEP 2020 and the RPwD Act 2016 with respect to inclusive education provisions.
2. To identify principal implementation challenges that limit the translation of policy intent into classroom practice.
3. To propose actionable recommendations to strengthen the operationalization of NEP-RPwD alignment across India's education system.

Methodology:

This research is based on a thorough analysis of the relevant literature search, conducted using databases PubMed, Google Scholar, Sage Journals, Wiley Online Library, Research Gate, Science Direct, and other resources, including review articles, book chapters, web pages, newspapers, and the draft of NEP 2020. The data was examined to assess the policy's alignment with the RPWD Act 2016 and identify implementation challenges.

Results and Discussion

1.Conceptual Alignment: Common Ground Between NEP 2020 and RPwD Act National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Rehabilitation and Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act share several fundamental principles:

Right to Education and Non-Discrimination: Both recognise education as a fundamental right for individuals with disabilities and mandate non-discriminatory access to educational resources.

Reasonable Accommodation and Individualised Support: NEP's flexible curriculum, support for special educational needs, alternative credentials, and continuous assessments align with RPwD's requirement for adjustments and accommodations to ensure inclusive learning environments.

Vocational and Lifelong Learning Pathways: NEP emphasises multiple entry and exit points, vocational education starting from middle school, and continuous upskilling. This aligns with RPwD's focus on employability and life skills development.

Accessibility: Both policies acknowledge the importance of accessibility, including physical, digital, and content accessibility. NEP mentions accessibility, Mother Tongue instruction, alternate formats, and technology, while RPwD mandates barrier-free environments, assistive devices, universal design, and accessible curriculum to ensure inclusive learning opportunities for all individuals.

2. Principal Implementation challenges
Teacher training and capacity building
While many institutional reforms within NEP aim to improve teacher education, the data show that many teacher training programs (both pre-service and in-service) are yet to integrate sufficiently robust modules on inclusive pedagogy, differentiated assessment, and the use of AT. As confirmation, Sahrawat & Shahi (2025) and Tiwari (2024) point to gaps in teacher knowledge, confidence, and practical skills.

Curriculum, assessment, and content adaptation
Adapting curriculum materials into accessible formats such as Braille, easy-read or pictorial versions, sign language, or augmentative communication devices is sporadic. Assessment reforms (competency-based, continuous evaluation) are promising in NEP, but implementation often fails to account for learners with disabilities in designing assessments.

Infrastructure & assistive technology
Many schools still lack basic infrastructural facilities (ramps, accessible toilets, tactile signage). Also, the digital divide in terms of device availability, connectivity, and relevant content remains a major bottleneck. Meanwhile, recent government proposals (Assistive Technology Rules, 2025) point toward more standardized regulation for AT, but the challenge will be effective roll-out and ensuring affordability and relevance. (Government of India, 2025)

Administrative coordination and governance
There is often a disconnect between national policy vision and state/district-level execution. States vary widely in their implementation capacities, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms. Clear lines of accountability are frequently missing.

Monitoring, data, and accountability
Data disaggregation (by type of disability, geographic region, gender, and socio-economic status) is weak. Learning outcome data specifically for students with disabilities are rare. Without this, progress is difficult to track or intervene in the targeted area.

3. Emergent Opportunities

The exploration of opportunities and emerging practices in inclusive education under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reveals a progressive movement towards technological enablement, policy coherence, and community-based innovation.

These developments represent India's evolving understanding of inclusion—not merely as a moral commitment, but as a systemic transformation encompassing pedagogy, accessibility, and governance.

Assistive Technology as an Enabler

Mandal, Ruidas, and Gope (2025) document compelling evidence of assistive technology (AT) serving as a bridge between exclusion and participation for learners with disabilities. Adaptive software, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, and screen readers have improved access to curriculum materials and communication channels. However, despite these positive outcomes, the reach of AT remains uneven. Many schools, especially in rural and government settings, lack sufficient infrastructure, trained personnel, and maintenance systems to sustain these interventions. Thus, while NEP 2020 underscores digital inclusion as a priority, the translation from policy to practice requires significant investment in teacher training, procurement mechanisms, and contextual adaptation.

Policy Developments and Regulatory Frameworks

The proposed *Assistive Technology (Standards & Accessibility) Rules, 2025* mark a notable step in institutionalizing inclusion. By addressing classification, procurement, and grievance handling, the policy framework attempts to close long-standing regulatory gaps. Yet, the success of such policies hinges on their integration within school-level planning and monitoring systems. Without localized accountability structures, policies risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. A comparative reading of NEP 2020 and these emerging regulations suggests that while national intent is progressive, implementation frameworks are still evolving toward operational efficiency.

Localized Innovations and Community Participation

Grassroots initiatives by NGOs and community-based organizations are redefining inclusion from the bottom up. Through inclusive resource centers, teacher peer networks, and low-cost multilingual learning materials, these organizations demonstrate how contextual relevance can complement formal policy initiatives. These innovations resonate with NEP 2020's emphasis on flexibility, local languages, and participatory learning. However, the lack of systematic documentation and state-level recognition of such models limits their scalability. Integrating these community-driven models within teacher education and school improvement plans could significantly strengthen inclusive education ecosystems.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings highlight a transitional moment in India's inclusive education trajectory. While technological interventions and policy frameworks provide a promising foundation, sustained inclusion will depend on building human capacity and institutional accountability.

Future research must explore models of integrated teacher training in AT, cost-effectiveness of localized innovations, and longitudinal outcomes for learners using assistive tools. Furthermore, collaboration between government agencies, academia, and civil society can create evidence-based pathways for scaling inclusion.

Case Examples & Recent Developments

In Delhi, the Directorate of Education (DoE) issued directives in late 2024 requiring all 12 special schools to comply with inclusive education guidelines under NEP 2020 and RPwD Act 2016. Required actions included providing free aids and appliances, implementing smart classrooms, training in Braille and sign language, documenting Unique Disability IDs, maintaining disability certificates, and structured schedules for special educators. This demonstrates administrative willingness but also highlights the intense demands on schools to adapt quickly. (India Today, 2024)

The Assistive Technology (Standards & Accessibility) Rules, 2025 draft proposed by the central government is a significant policy development. It provides for the classification and standardization of AT devices, mandates compliance with BIS or other notified authority standards, proposes an online portal for certification and distribution, and includes grievance mechanisms. If implemented fully, this could reduce one major barrier to access to assistive devices. (Business Standard / Economic Times, 2025).

Academic studies, such as Sahrawat & Shahi (2025), have specifically looked at students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs). Their findings suggest that while policies recognize SLD, many classrooms are not equipped to serve them in online/digital mode: lack of teacher awareness, lack of adaptive content, difficulty in accommodations, weaker home support. This points to the need for targeted interventions for different categories of disability rather than one-size-fits-all. These examples reinforce that while the policy environment is evolving and shows strong alignment, implementation remains uneven, resource-dependent, and largely driven by state-level capacities.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Expanding on earlier recommendations, the following steps are especially crucial given the recent developments:

1. Operationalize Assistive Technology Regulation: Finalize and operationalize the Assistive Technology (Standards & Accessibility) Rules, 2025. Ensure certified AT devices are affordable, publicly available through government schemes, and integrated into school budgets.

2. Specialisation within Teacher Professional Development: Introduce disability-specific modules (for SLDs, visual impairment hearing impairment, etc.) in teacher training curricula. Enable local workshops and peer mentoring, and ensure hands-on experience with AT tools during in-service training.

3. Accessibility Compliance as Funding Condition: Institute a mechanism by which central and state grants (for school infrastructure, digital education) are tied to verified accessibility audits. Schools failing audits should receive support, but also be held accountable.

4.Localized Content and Inclusive Assessment: Develop accessible curricular content (multilingual, alternate formats, easy-read, pictorial) and inclusive assessment frameworks that account for different disabilities. Encourage boards and assessment agencies to publish guidelines for accommodating learners with different needs.

5.Strengthen Monitoring through Disaggregated Data: Build data systems at district and block levels to collect disaggregated indicators for inclusion: enrolment, dropout, learning outcomes, transition to higher education/employment. Use this data in state-level dashboards, publicly report progress, and conduct regular evaluations.

6.Inclusive Technology & Digital Infrastructure Outreach: Target device distribution and connectivity to remote and underserved regions. Ensure content is accessible, teacher and caregiver training is embedded, and digital literacy is included. Leverage public-private partnerships where appropriate.

7.Stakeholder Engagement and Community Participation: Involve organizations of persons with disabilities, parents, and caregivers in planning, implementation, and monitoring. Their lived experience can help design more usable interventions.

8.Resource Mobilization and Sustainable Funding: The government should allocate specific funds for inclusive education that remain protected across budget cycles. International funding, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) contributions, and NGO partnerships could be leveraged to supplement government efforts, especially for AT procurement and teacher training.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 and the RPwD Act (2016) together form a strong normative and legal foundation for inclusive education in India. Their alignment in principles, access flexibility, reasonable accommodation, support for assistive technology, and vocational pathways provides significant promise. However, the transition from policy to practice is obstructed by several implementation challenges: inadequate teacher training, patchy infrastructure and digital access, lack of standardized institutional practices, and weak monitoring regimes. Recent developments, such as the draft Assistive Technology Rules (2025) and mandates by state authorities, indicate political will and emerging momentum. To ensure that inclusive education is realized in classrooms, not just on paper, India must take decisive action: enforce regulation, invest in capacity building, ensure accountability, and engage stakeholders meaningfully. In doing so, NEP 2020 can fulfil the promise of the RPwD Act, fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities to equitable, quality education, and contribute to broader goals of social justice and national development.

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