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(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

REASSESSING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIAN SCHOOLS: A SIX-YEAR EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMIC BARRIERS USING UDISE+ DATA (2020–2026)

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ABSTRACT

Every child must have an equal opportunity to learn through inclusive education. There has been a great deal of policy activity in this area but the reality of inclusive education in Indian schools is still hampered by significant systemic challenges. This paper looks at the state of inclusive education in Indian schools using UDISE+ data from 2020 to 2026. The results point to several systemic impediments including very low enrolment, gender gaps and a lack of accessible infrastructure (ramps, handrails, CWSN toilets etc.). Enrolment of CWSN has in general increased over the period of the study (there was a temporary dip in enrolment as a result of the transition to the student-wise data collection system in 2022–2023) but meaningful participation is still constrained by the gender gaps and the uneven distribution of infrastructure. The paper draws on empirical evidence and international best practice to make a series of practical recommendations around targeted investment in infrastructure, gender responsive facilities, inclusive pedagogy and community-based monitoring. The intent is to support the effective implementation of the NEP 2020 and the RPwD Act 2016 and to move from a model of basic physical access to one of equitable and high-quality learning for all CWSN.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Disability, Systemic Barriers, Policy Framework, UDISE+, CWSN

1 INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a core expression of social justice, human rights, and educational equity. It is the position that every child has the right to learn in an integrated, barrier-free environment regardless of their physical, sensory, cognitive, or socio-economic circumstances (UNICEF, 2017). The principle of inclusive education has moved from one of charitable protection to one of a rights-based approach. This was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and further cemented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. Article 24 of the UNCRPD requires all signatory states to provide inclusive education at all levels to ensure the full development of the human potential, dignity, and self-respect of every individual (United Nations, 2006). In India, the case for inclusive education is both a moral imperative and a strategic imperative for national development. India has one of the largest and most complex school education systems in the world, and the challenge of providing equitable access to education for CWSN is enormous. The statutory framework for inclusion has developed quite rapidly over the years, moving from a series of ad hoc welfare schemes to a framework that is now constitutional and rights-based. The current national policy is clearly articulated in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and the National

Education Policy (NEP), 2020, which together envisage an education system in which the physical, pedagogical, and social barriers to inclusion are systematically removed (Ministry of Human Resource Development (MOE, 2020) Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD, 2016). Despite all the statutory commitments, there are still huge gaps between what is on paper in terms of policy and what happens on the ground in the schools. The UDISE+ (Unified District Information System for Education Plus), which is run by the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, is the main national database for tracking long-term educational indicators (Ministry of Education, 2026). The most recent official reports do point to an expansion of school infrastructure, but the actual evidence suggests that there are still serious deficiencies in terms of functional access, gender equity, and equitable distribution of resources for CWSN (Ministry of Education, 2026). This paper looks at the longitudinal profiles of CWSN enrolment, gender-disaggregated participation, and physical accessibility infrastructure in Indian schools over a six-year observational period (2020–21 to 2025–26). It does so by examining the empirical data from the UDISE+ database against the national legal framework and international standards, in this case, Sustainable Development Goal 4 Ultimately, it provides a critical appraisal of the systemic impediments to inclusive education in India (UNESCO, 2015).

2 HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDIA

The history of special and inclusive education in India is a story of a gradual evolution from early days of philanthropic isolation to state-sponsored integration and, finally, to the present-day continuum of rights-based education.

2.1 Early Post-Independence Policy Frameworks (1968–1986)

In the immediate post-independence period, education for children with disabilities was largely the responsibility of voluntary NGOs and philanthropic trusts via their own segregated special residential schools ,The first recognition of state responsibility in this area came in the National Policy on Education of 1968, which called for the expansion of facilities for children with physical and mental handicaps and the promotion of integrated education wherever possible (Ministry of Education, 1968). In 1974, the Ministry of Social Welfare introduced the centrally sponsored scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC). The IEDC was the Government of India's first attempt at mainstreaming children with mild to moderate disabilities into regular primary and secondary schools through the provision of financial assistance for books, uniforms, equipment, and teacher stipends However, the scheme was geographically limited in its reach, and implementation at the administrative level was hampered by a lack of coordination between various departments (Department of Social Welfare, 1974). The National Policy on Education (1986) with its accompanying Programme of Action (1992) provided a much more structured document. NPE 1986 made it very clear that its objective was to integrate the physically and mentally handicapped with the general community as equal partners, to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986). It established a clear classification system whereby children with mild disabilities were to be enrolled in regular schools, those with severe disabilities were to receive education in special institutions, and children developing basic daily living skills were to be prepared for integration into mainstream schools (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986;Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1992)

2.2 Pilot Projects, Infrastructure Programs, and International Directives (1987–1999)

In 1987, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in partnership with UNICEF launched Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (PIED). PIED was the first initiative to adopt a localized, block-level approach to early identification, multi-disciplinary assessment camps, establishment of resource centres, and neighbourhood school enrolment across several states (NCERT, 1987). Concurrently, major systemic reforms to primary education were introduced via Operation Blackboard (1987) and the District Primary Education Programme , Operation Blackboard focused on the provision of basic physical infrastructure and teaching-learning materials in primary schools, whereas DPEP focused on the actualization of decentralized, district-level inclusive planning (Dave & Gupta, 1988) (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1994). As part of DPEP, household surveys were conducted to identify school needs, resource teachers were appointed, the itinerant teacher model was introduced, and capital grants were provided for constructing basic wheelchair ramps (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1994). Internationally, India became a party to the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in 1994. The Salamanca Statement established the global benchmark that inclusive schools are "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating inclusive communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO, 1994). This principle was given the force of law in India through the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. Section 26 of the PwD Act, 1995 made it compulsory for the government and local authorities to provide free education to every child with a disability in a suitable learning environment up to the age of 18 years(Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995).

2.3 Rights-Based Statutory Expansion and Secondary Education (2001–2016)

The launch of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2001 marked a major expansion of elementary education (Classes I to VIII) programs. SSA implemented a formal "Zero Rejection" policy stating that no child with special needs should be excluded from regular schooling, SSA allocated funds per child for assessment camps, assistive technology, block-level resource rooms, itinerant special educators, home-based education for children with severe disabilities, and barrier-free infrastructure (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2001). To address higher secondary education, the IEDSS scheme was launched in 2009, replacing IEDC. IEDSS provided 100% central assistance to states for CWSN entering Classes IX to XII, covering reader allowances, stipends for disabled girls, appointment of special teachers, and the creation of state model inclusive schools (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009). IEDSS was later integrated into the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in 2013. (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2013).

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 fundamentally transformed how the right to schooling could be legally enforced. Stemming from Article 21A of India's Constitution, this law prohibited bias, eliminated entry testing, mandated age-appropriate grade placement, reserved 25% of entry-level seats in private unaided schools for disadvantaged groups, and ordered the construction of accessible facilities (Government of India, 2009)

Subsequently, the RPwD Act of 2016 replaced the 1995 law to align India with the UNCRPD, expanding recognized disabilities from 7 to 21 categories to include chronic neurological conditions, blood disorders, and specific learning disabilities Under Chapter III of the Act, every educational institution is mandated to welcome all learners, adapt infrastructure for easy entry, provide study materials in accessible formats, and offer personalized support (Government of India, 2016).

2.4 Unified Educational Continuum and NEP 2020 Framework (2018–Present)

Beginning in 2018, the Ministry consolidated SSA, RMSA, and teacher training funding under a single umbrella scheme named Samagra Shiksha, promoting a seamless educational continuum from preschool to senior secondary levels (Ministry of Education, 2018). This program manages learning flows from early childhood right up to senior high school, allocating dedicated funds to identify CWSN, subsidize travel and helper allowances, provide stipends for disabled girls, and strengthen pedagogical training capacities (Ministry of Education, 2018). Most recently, the NEP 2020 has placed inclusion at the heart of India's educational overhaul. NEP 2020 emphasizes early identification, mandatory cross-disability training for regular teachers, the recruitment of special educators, the creation of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in resource-scarce regions, and the deployment of assistive technologies and digital platforms like DIKSHA ,Through these coordinated measures, NEP 2020 seeks to transition Indian schools beyond physical co-location toward genuine, equitable learning environments. (Ministry of Education, 2020)

2.5 Research objectives

- To review the status of inclusive education in Indian schools by using UDISE+ data.
- To identify the key systemic barriers affecting the implementation of inclusive education.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative empirical research design utilizing secondary longitudinal data derived from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), the comprehensive national repository managed by the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India (Ministry of Education, 2026). The investigation spans a six-year observational period covering academic years 2020–21 through 2025–26.

3.2 Data Sources and Key Indicators

The empirical analysis focuses on core indicators tracked across annual national UDISE+ reports:

- **Demographic and Enrollment Indicators:** Total enrollment of Children with Special Needs (CWSN), disaggregated by gender (boys and girls), and year-on-year growth rates (**Table 1**).
- **Infrastructure and Accessibility Indicators:** Physical access indicators across public and private school facilities, including:
- Availability of basic access ramps
- Availability of ramps equipped with handrails
- Provision of dedicated CWSN-friendly toilets

- Proportion of fully functional CWSN-friendly toilets (**Table 2**)
- **Policy Integration Mapping:** Synthesis of empirical UDISE+ trends against specific statutory mandates outlined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016), National Education Policy (NEP 2020), and Samagra Shiksha (**Table 3**).

3.3 Analytical Strategy

Descriptive statistical procedures were utilized to evaluate absolute numbers, proportions, distribution ratios, and compound annual growth metrics:

- **Trend Analysis:** Evaluated longitudinal variations and net percentage change in overall CWSN enrollment across the six-year dataset.
- **Gender Equity Analysis:** Assessed gender-disaggregated trends to identify systemic gender gaps and disparities in CWSN participation rates.
- **Infrastructure Adequacy Analysis:** Evaluated institutional progress toward physical accessibility standards and identified persistent infrastructure deficits across schooling levels.
- **Policy Alignment Mapping:** Cross-analysed empirical data points against legislative requirements to quantify the gap between statutory policy objectives and implementation on the ground.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Because this investigation relies entirely on publicly available, anonymized national administrative datasets published by the Ministry of Education, no human subjects were directly involved. Consequently, formal institutional review board (IRB) approval was not required.

3.5 Status of india's inclusive education system

According to the *Disabled Persons in India (2016)* report published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation based on Census 2011 data, there are approximately 26.8 million persons with disabilities in India, accounting for 2.21% of the total national population. Within this demographic, approximately 10.4 million individuals belong to the 0–29 years age cohort, representing 38.8% of the total disabled population. Furthermore, an estimated 2.04 million children with disabilities fall within the early childhood cohort of 0–6 years (MoSPI, 2016).

The MoSPI (2016) report highlights critical participation gaps among school-age Children with Special Needs (CWSN) aged 5–19 years:

- Current School Attendance: - Only 61% of CWSN aged 5–19 years were actively attending educational institutions, with male students comprising 57% of those enrolled.
- Discontinuation Rates: -Approximately 12% of CWSN had attended school previously but subsequently dropped out.
- Complete Exclusion: - Over 27% of CWSN in this age bracket had never attended any formal educational institution.

The likelihood of non-attendance escalates significantly with the severity and nature of the impairment: 50% of children with mental illness and 54% of children with multiple disabilities had never received formal schooling. These figures indicate that severe and complex impairment categories experience compounding barriers to structural inclusion (MoSPI, 2016).

As reported in the national UDISE+ 2025–26 administrative database, India manages one of the world's largest public education networks, encompassing more than 1.467 million schools, over 10.3 million teachers, and nearly 247.2 million students enrolled across pre-primary, primary, upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels (Ministry of Education, 2026). Despite the expansive scale of this infrastructure, total CWSN enrollment accounts for less than 1% of total school enrollment nationwide, underscoring a persistent system-wide disparity between overall institutional capacity and the actual participation of children with special needs.

Table 1: CWSN Enrollment in India 2020-2026

Year	Boys	Girls	Total	Growth
2020-21	1236640	932490	2169130	-
2021-22	1298828	941528	2240356	+3.28%
2022-23	1207714	899495	2107212	-5.94%
2023-24	1210672	903438	2114110	+0.33%
2024-25	1227952	921306	2149258	+1.66%
2025-26	1264038	947188	2211226	+2.88%

Source: Compiled by author from Ministry of Education UDISE + national data base (2020-2026) Note: Growth % represents the year-on-year percentage change in total enrollment compared to the immediately preceding year.

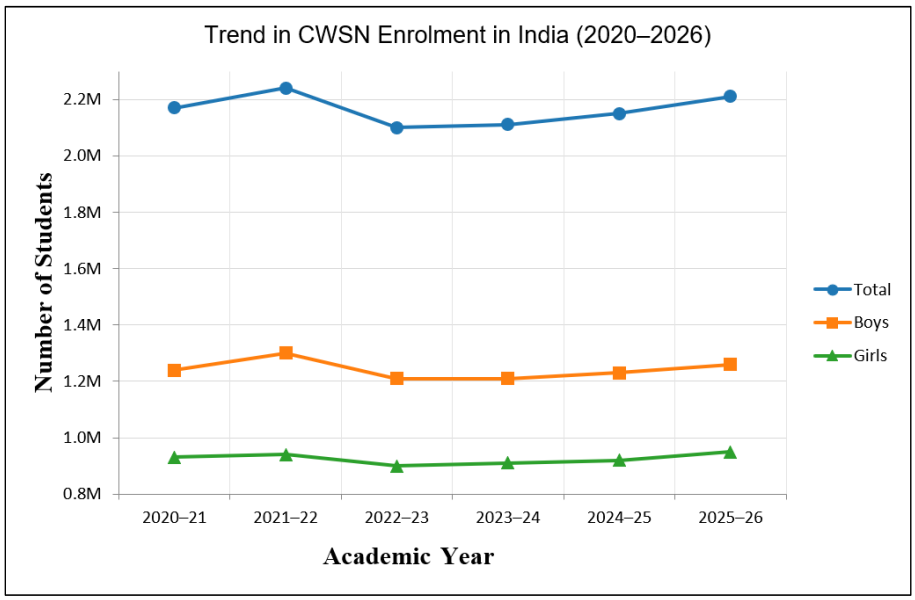


Figure 1: Trend in CWSN Enrolment in india

4 DATA ANALYSIS: CWSN ENROLLMENT TRENDS (2020–2026)

- The patterns relating to enrollment over time and the reforms made to the structural data as detailed in Table 1 (and visually illustrated in Graph 1), overall enrollment of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) across Indian schools demonstrated distinct operational phases over the six-year observation period:
- During the initial growth phase (2020–21 to 2021–22) the total number of students enrolled in CWSN rose from 2,169,130 in 2020–21 to 2,240,356 in 2021–22, which corresponds to a year-on-year growth rate of +3.28% (+71,226 students).
- Structural Reform and Empirical Contraction (2022–23): Enrollment dropped sharply to 2,107,212 in 2022–23, representing a decrease of -5.94% (-133,144 students). In terms of analysis, care should be taken when interpreting this figure and it should not be seen as a real physical withdrawal of students from school. When the academic year 2022–23 began, the Ministry of Education carried out a major reform of the national UDISE+ system, moving from reporting at the school level on an aggregate basis to a system that tracks individual students and links this to their unique student identification records. This change in the system removed duplicate entries, enhanced the accuracy of the data, and set higher verification standards throughout the district databases.
- Steady Recovery Phase (2023–24 to 2025–26): Following the data verification reform, CWSN enrollment demonstrated steady, continuous recovery: In the 2023–24 period the figure reached 2,114,110 (+0.33%). In the 2024–25 period, the figure reached 2,149,258 (+1.66%). In the 2025–26 period, the figure reached 2,211,226 (+2.88%). By 2025–26, the total number of students enrolled in CWSN had gone beyond the 2020

baseline level of 2020 21 by 1.94 per cent, which shows that recovery had been sustained and that institutional coverage had expanded across the country.

Table 2: Availability of inclusive infrastructure in Indian schools (2020-2026)

Indicators	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-2026	Growth %
Total No of Schools	1509136	1489115	1466109	1471891	1471473	1466682	-2.81%
Schools With Ramps	1067752 (70.75%)	1069795 (71.84%)	1135895 (77.48%)	1134850 (77.1%)	1164274 (79.1%)	1169391 (79.7%)	+9.52%
Schools With Ramps and Handrails	729114 (48.31%)	740395 (49.72%)	748152 (50.03%)	769906 (52.3%)	808460 (54.9%)	853916 (58.2%)	+17.12%
Schools With CWSN Friendly Toilets	380987 (25.25%)	401487 (26.96%)	475765 (32.45%)	506695 (34.4%)	532143 (35.6%)	588650 (40.1%)	+54.51%
Schools With Functional CWSN Toilets	365907 (24.25%)	382405 (25.68%)	445540 (30.39%)	473956 (32.2%)	491262 (33.4%)	5581183 (38.1%)	+52.55%

Source: Compiled by author from Ministry of Education UDISE + national data base (2020-2026

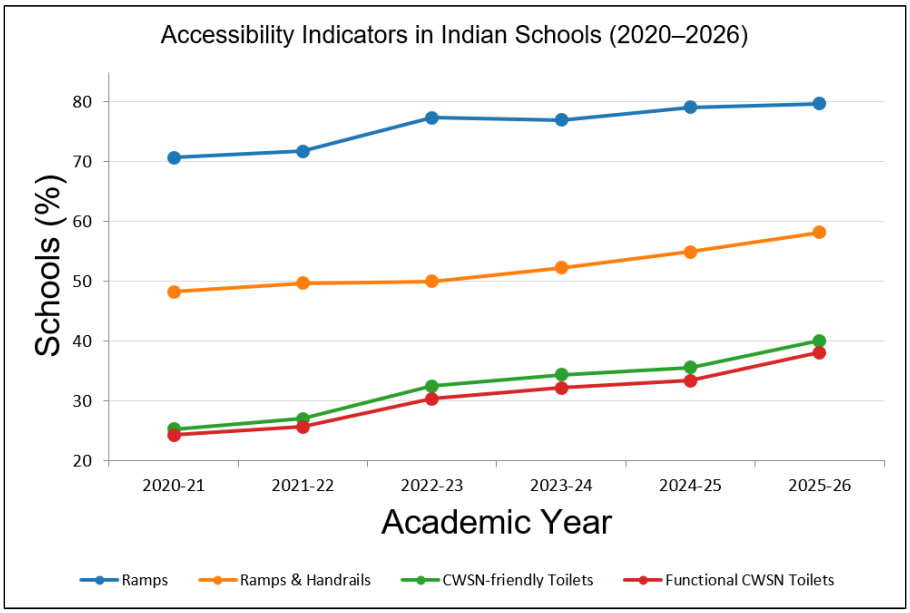


Figure 2: Accessibility indicators in Indian schools

Source: Compiled by author from Ministry of Education UDISE + national data base (2020-2026)

4.1 Structural Gaps in Physical Access and Inclusive Infrastructure

4.1.1 Gaps in Accessibility and Infrastructure for Inclusion

The information in **Table 2** shows the progressive picture of inclusive infrastructures in Indian schools for the years 2020–21 to 2025–26. Results show slow improvements in physical access and sanitation services even with decline in overall number of schools.

4.1.2 Institutional Rationalization

The number of schools kept on falling until it reached 1.49 million for the 2021–22 period and then dropped to 1.47 million by 2022–23. In the 2023–24 period, the total number of schools remained at 1.47 million, and it was also 1.47 million for both the 2024–25 and 2025–26 years. Overall, there was a 2.81% decrease in the total number of schools during the study period. The reason for this decline is that schools which had low enrolments and a shortage of staff were merged with larger schools in order to make more effective use of the available resources.

4.1.3 Trends in Physical Accessibility

Schools which had ramps showed progressive improvement throughout the study period. The number of schools with ramps rose from 1.07 million (70.75%) in 2020–21 to 1.07 million (71.84%) in 2021–22. A significant increase was seen in 2022–23 when the figure reached 1.14 million (77.48%). Even though there was an absolute decrease in the total number of schools in 2023–24, the total number of schools with ramps continued to show steady improvement, reaching 77.1%. Further gains were made in 2024–25 with 1.16 million (79.1%) and again in 2025–26 with 1.17 million (79.7%). The number of schools with ramps increased by 9.52% and there was steady progress in terms of basic mobility access. The number of schools that had both ramps and handrails also showed a gradual improvement each year. In 2020–21 about 0.73 million schools (48.31%) had both ramps and handrails; this increased to 0.74 million schools (49.72%) in 2021–22 and reached 0.75 million schools (50.03%) in 2022–23, showing that more than half of Indian schools had started to provide improved physical accessibility. The upward trend carried on in 2023–24 with 0.77 million schools (52.3%), then rose to 0.81 million schools (54.9%) in 2024–25. By 2025–26 the figure had climbed to 0.85 million schools (58.2%). Overall, the proportion of schools with ramps and handrails increased by 9.89 percentage points over the six-year period. Nevertheless, over two-fifths of schools (41.8%) still did not have ramps with handrails in 2025–26, underscoring the need for further investment to achieve universally accessible school infrastructure.

4.1.4 Expansion of Accessible Sanitation Facilities

The number of schools with CWSN-friendly toilets increased more rapidly than any of the other infrastructure indicators. It rose from 0.38 million (25.25%) in 2020–21 to 0.40 million (26.96%) in 2021–22. A notable increase occurred in 2022–23 when it reached 0.48 million (32.45%). The upward trend continued in 2023–24 (0.51 million; 34.4%), in 2024–25 (0.53 million; 35.6%), and in 2025–26 (0.59 million; 40.1%). Overall, there was an increase of 54.51% in the number of schools having CWSN-friendly toilets, which represents the greatest improvement among all the infrastructure indicators. Likewise, the number of functional CWSN toilets also increased steadily over the course of the study period. It moved from 0.37 million (24.25%) in 2020–21 to 0.38 million (25.68%) in 2021–22, then to 0.45 million (30.39%) in 2022–23, followed by 0.47 million (32.2%) in 2023–24, 0.49 million (33.4%) in 2024–25, and finally 0.56 million (38.1%) in 2025–26. This indicates an overall increase of 52.55%, showing that a large number of the newly constructed accessible toilets remained functional and usable.

The UDISE+ results show that there has been progress alongside the continued existence of disparities in the implementation of inclusive education. In order to look at how these empirical findings correspond with the provisions of

India's inclusive education policy framework, Table 3 links the major indicators with the relevant policy mandates and provides an interpretation of the observed trends

Table 3: A link between the UDISE+ empirical findings and inclusive education policies in India

Indicator	Empirical Link & Key Finding	Relevant Policy Framework	Precise Statutory Mandate	Policy Implementation Assessment
CWSN Enrollment	Linked to Table 1: Total enrollment rose from 2.17M (2020–21) to 2.21M (2025–26). Experienced a temporary 5.94% drop in 2022–23 due to the switch to student-wise tracking before steady recovery.	• RPwD Act (2016): Sections 16, 17(a), 31 • NEP(2020): Paragraphs 6.1, 6.10 • Samagra Shiksha(2018): IE-CWSN Component	Mandates non-discriminatory admission, free and compulsory education (ages 6–18 in appropriate environments), continuous tracking, and equitable learning support.	Overall recovery reflects expanding coverage under Samagra Shiksha. However, enrollment fluctuations indicate a need for sustained identification of drives, monitoring, and retention strategies.
Gender-Disaggregated Enrollment	Linked to Table 1: Persistent gender gap; male CWSN consistently comprised ~57.5% of total enrollment, while female CWSN	• NEP (2020): Paragraph 6.2 (SEDGs Framework) • RPwD Act (2016): Section 16	Establishes the Gender Inclusion Fund and targeted stipends to overcome intersecting socio-cultural, safety, and mobility barriers	Stagnant enrollment ratios reveal that gender-responsive provisions have not yet translated into equitable participation. Targeted socio-cultural

	accounted for only ~42.5% across all six years.	• Samagra Shiksha(2018): Girl Child Stipend Scheme	facing female students with disabilities.	interventions and safer transit options remain crucial.
Schools with Ramps	Linked to Table 2: Basic ramp coverage expanded from 70.75% (1.07M schools) in 2020–21 to 79.70% (1.17M schools) in 2025–26 (+8.95 percentage points).	• RPwD Act (2016): Section 16(ii) • Samagra Shiksha(2018): Civil Works Norms • PM SHRI Scheme(2022): Section 3	Legally mandates non-discriminatory physical access, requiring all educational campuses and facilities to be fully barrier-free.	Demonstrates steady civil works progress. However, ~20.3% of schools still lack basic ramp access, indicating a remaining gap in universal physical access.
Schools with Ramps and Handrails	Linked to Table 2: Mobility support increased from 48.31% (0.73M schools) to 58.20% (0.85M schools), marking a 9.89 percentage point growth over six years.	• RPwD Act (2016): Section 16(ii) • Harmonized Guidelines for Barrier-Free Environment (2021),Accessible India campaign (2015)	Requires entry points and corridors to incorporate universal design principles and physical support features to prevent injuries and ensure independent mobility.	While most schools now feature supported mobility pathways, over 41.8% of campuses still lack handrails, limiting independent mobility for students with severe physical impairments.
CWSN-Friendly Toilets	Linked to Table 2: Schools with accessible toilets expanded from 25.25% (0.38M) to 40.10% (0.59M). Functional accessible toilets reached 38.10% (0.56M).	• RPwD Act (2016): Section 16(ii) • Samagra Shiksha(2018): Infrastructure Grant • SDG 4(2015): Target 4. a	Mandates disability- and gender-sensitive sanitation facilities, ensuring privacy, safety, and hygiene across school campuses.	Despite a 54.5% overall growth rate (the fastest among all Table 2 indicators), ~59.9% of schools still lack accessible toilets, representing a major hurdle to student retention.

4.1.4.1 Detailed Analysis of Table 3

Policy Implementation Table 3 provides an analysis of how the data gathered from the UDISE+ database between 2020-2026 compares with policy implementation. This includes information on the statistics from Table 1 (Enrolment) and Table 2 (Civil Infrastructure) and policies to ensure inclusive education. The RPwD Act 2016; National Education Policy 2020; Samagra Shiksha and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) all include policies to ensure inclusive education.

4.1.5 CWSN Enrolment Statistic from Table 1

CWSN enrolment increased from 2.17million to 2.21million between 2020-21 and 2025-26. There was a decrease of 5.94% in 2022-23 due to the introduction of a verified enrolment system.

- **Policies –** Section 16,17(a),31 of the RPwD Act 2016 states that children with benchmark disabilities aged between 6 and 18 can be enrolled without discrimination and receive free, appropriate education. Paragraphs 6.1 and 6.10 of the NEP 2020 also show that children can be tracked continuously and receive individualized support. The Inclusive Education policy within Samagra Shiksha also states that children can be tracked.
- **Analysis –** Overall, the number has shown a gradual rise of CWSN enrolled since the data was updated in 2022-23. This shows that the reach of Samagra Shiksha has increased. However, the number of CWSN is still somewhat low when comparing it to the overall number of school age children in the country, showing that many children with special needs are not being registered. To improve this there needs to be an improvement in early identification camps within each block.

4.1.6 Gender Differences

• **Statistic from Table 1** – Male enrolment has remained consistent throughout all 6 years, always being approximately 57.5%. Female enrolment has remained the same throughout.

• **Policies –** Paragraph 6.2 of the NEP 2020 states that there is a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to help overcome barriers for female students who are marginalized. The Samagra Shiksha also provides a financial incentive as part of the Girl Child Stipend Scheme (₹200/month). Section 16 RPwD Act 2016 states that they cannot be discriminated against.

• **Analysis –** The number of females enrolled has remained completely unchanged, meaning that there have not been enough financial incentives to overcome cultural barriers. To overcome this there needs to be gender sensitive infrastructure, safe transport and awareness campaigns.

4.1.7 Ramps

• **Statistic from Table 2** – The number of schools with basic ramps has increased from 70.75% (1.07 million) to 79.70% (1.17 million). The number of schools with ramps with handrails has increased from 48.31% (0.73 million) to 58.20% (0.85 million).

• **Policies –** Section 16(ii) RPwD Act 2016 states that all settings must provide a barrier free environment. The Civil Works Norms within Samagra Shiksha, PM SHRI Scheme (Sec.3), and the Harmonized Guidelines for Barrier Free Environment (2021) all state that all settings must provide barrier free infrastructure. This must include handrails along ramps and corridors.

• **Analysis –** The data shows that there has been a large improvement in infrastructure with almost 80% of schools in India having basic ramps. However, 20.3% still do not have basic ramps and 41.8% do not have ramps with handrails. This shows there is a large issue with the lack of universally accessible infrastructure. Without handrails and non-slip surfaces basic ramps are a danger to pupils with severe mobility issues or visual impairments. This shows that infrastructure is being provided but not necessarily to a universally accessible standard.

4.1.8 Accessible Toilets

• **Statistic from Table 2** – The number of schools with CWSN friendly toilets has increased from 25.25% (0.38 million) to 40.10% (0.59 million). This shows a 54.5% increase overall. This is the largest increase between all the civil data. Functional CWSN toilets have increased to 38.10% (0.56 million) in 2025-26.

• **Policies –** Section 16(ii) RPwD Act 2016, SDG 4 Target 4.a (Indicator 4.a.1) and the Infrastructure Grants within Samagra Shiksha all state there should be disability and gender sensitive toilets. Paragraph 6.14 NEP 2020 and Annual Work Plan and Budget (AWP&B) Rules within Samagra Shiksha also state that money should be spent on maintaining infrastructure

• **Analysis –** Although there has been a large increase in accessible toilets, 59.9% of schools in India do not have CWSN friendly toilets. The data also shows a large discrepancy between the number of accessible toilets (40.10%) and functional accessible toilets (38.10%). This means that infrastructure is being provided but not maintained. This leads to higher dropout rates for CWSN as toilets may be broken, locked or lack water. Overall, the data from Table 3 shows that whilst India have done well to implement inclusive education into their policies, there are still issues with policy implementation. There is a large issue with accessible toilets, ramps with handrails and female representation. The priority needs to shift to improving the quality of infrastructure rather than just providing basic infrastructure. This will ensure that there is proper accountability within the RPwD Act 2016 and NEP 2020.

International Comparison -The international data shows that to implement inclusive education there needs to be a shift to ensuring that pupils are actively involved, gender equality, functional infrastructure, continuous professional development and community monitoring. To overcome the issues identified within this study (Tables 1-3) we can look at the following international comparisons:

4.1.9 Implementing a mandatory universal accessible accreditation (Japan)

• Issue in India – There is a large lag between the increase in CWSN enrolment and the provision of ramps. Over 20% of schools do not have basic ramps and 41.8% do not have ramps with handrails. (Table 2)

• International Standard – The Fourth Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2023) states that investment in accessible infrastructure standard ramps, tactile flooring and universally accessible toilets should increase in line with the increase in CWSN enrolment.

• Implementation in India – The MoE should introduce mandatory standard Accessibility Audits as part of the verification process within the UDISE+ data. The funding for each state within Samagra Shiksha should be conditional on schools meeting the minimum requirements from section 16 of the RPwD Act (2016).

4.1.10 Ensuring gender sensitive and universally accessible toilets (Canada)

• Issue in India: Female pupils with disabilities are vulnerable within the school setting. This is because there are no accessible toilets or they are broken leading to higher loss of retention among adolescent CWSN girls. (Table 1 & Table 2)

• International Standard – The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC, 2020) provides guidelines to ensure facilities are inclusive. This means that there should be safe, gender specific and tailored infrastructure.

• Implementation in India – The guidelines for civil infrastructure within the Swachh Vidyalaya campaign should state that all schools must have fully accessible gender specific CWSN toilets. This will remove a major barrier for girls with disabilities and help meet the goals of promoting equality within NEP 2020.

4.1.11 Implementing mandatory continual professional development (Australia)

• Issue in India – Whilst there may be accessible infrastructure general teachers do not have the confidence or training to differentiate so CWSN are excluded within lessons.

• International Standard – The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2017) provides standards to ensure that all teachers have the competence to use Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiation and emotional support.

• Implementation in India – Dedicated training modules on the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and teaching students with diverse disabilities should be incorporated into the compulsory 50 hours of annual Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers. These modules can be delivered nationwide through the NISHTHA online platform.

4.1.12 Strengthening Community-Based Monitoring of Inclusive School Infrastructure (South Africa)

- Issue in India: Centralised monitoring mechanisms may not adequately identify infrastructure-related barriers in rural schools, such as locked, damaged or poorly maintained toilets designed for Children with Special Needs (CWSN).
- International Best Practices: South Africa's Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) emphasises institutional support, community participation and the development of mechanisms for identifying barriers to learning at the community level. Similarly, the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (Department of Basic Education, 2014), particularly paragraph 35, assigns School Governing Bodies (SGBs) responsibility for promoting inclusive school environments and monitoring the implementation of learner-support processes.
- Implementation in India: School Management Committees , under Section 21 of the RTE Act (2009), should be strengthened through training, financial support and clearly defined responsibilities to conduct quarterly accessibility and infrastructure-functionality audits. Collaboration with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), parents and local disability organisations should be encouraged to facilitate timely identification and resolution of infrastructure-related barriers.

4.2 Recommendations for India

Based on the data from the UDISE+ database between 2020-2026 and international best practice the following 4 recommendations are recommended to improve the implementation of the NEP 2020 and RPwD Act 2016.

4.2.1 Modernize Infrastructure

Implement mandatory Universal Design Audits – Move away from basic infrastructure (e.g. concrete ramps) and ensure all ramps are fully compliant with Universal Design standards (Harmonized Guidelines for Barrier Free Environment 2021). All ramps must have double height handrails, anti-slip tactile surfaces and wide doorways.

Ring fence budget for toilets – A ring fenced budget should be set aside within the Infrastructure Grant from Samagra Shiksha to repair CWSN friendly toilets. This will help to close the gap between the number of accessible toilets 40.10% and functional toilets 38.10%. (Table 2)

4.2.2 Gender Equality

Implement Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) – The money allocated within the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) should be used to increase the Girl Child Stipend Scheme. This should include increasing the financial incentive (Rs200 per month) to

match current living costs. Money should also be provided to provide free specialized transport for girls with special needs.

• Support transition to secondary – Resource centers should be set up within blocks to support female CWSN during the transition from primary (Class VIII) to secondary education (Class IX).

4.2.3 Teacher Training

• Include training for teaching across disabilities – Modules on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiation should be included within the NISHTHA teacher training scheme. This should be mandatory for all general teachers and be included within their 50 hours of CPD per year. Increase itinerant special educator numbers – Under Samagra Shiksha there should be guidelines on how many candidates there should be per teacher. This will ensure that itinerant special educators are supporting pupils regularly.

4.3 Community

SMC Social Audits – School Management Committees should be mandated to complete Social Audits with local Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) and local disability organizations. This should be completed every 6 months to ensure infrastructure is functioning properly before submitting data to UDISE+. Improved UDISE+ data – Future data should be improved to identify the specific disability type. There are 21 recognized disability types within the RPwD Act 2016 so this would allow targeted resource allocation.

5 CONCLUSION

The data from the UDISE+ database was analyzed to identify trends within inclusive education in India. The study found that there are still issues with enrolment, gender differences and infrastructure for CWSN. Although there have been some improvements with ramps, handrails and CWSN friendly toilets there are still large gaps to overcome to ensure equality. The study looked at international best practice from Japan, Canada, Australia and South Africa. This highlighted that there needs to be an improvement in investment in infrastructure, training teachers to be inclusive, providing assistive technology, gender specific facilities and community monitoring. This could help to effectively implement the NEP 2020 and RPwD Act, 2016. This will enable India to move beyond providing access to providing effective, equal, holistic and inclusive high-quality education.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

AI Disclosure

AI tools were used to assist with the creation and formatting of the line graphs and to enhance the language and readability of the manuscript. All data, calculations, analysis, interpretation, and the final presentation were independently verified and approved by the author.

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