

From Policy to Practice: A Critical Review of Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Assam

**Nargis Mazumdar¹, Pranab Rabi Das², Ruhul Amin³, Riya Chutia⁴,
Florina Ahmed⁵**

¹Assistant Professor, Dept of Education, Rowta Degree College, Rowta, Udalguri, Assam

²Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Adarsha Mahavidyalaya, Eraligool, Sribhumi, Assam

³Assistant Professor, Dept of Education, Govt. Model Degree College, Baghbar, Barpeta, Assam

⁴M.A. in Education, pursuing M.Ed., Govt. College of Teacher Education, Kokrajhar, Assam

⁵M.A. in Education, Former Student, Department of Education, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam

Abstract

Inclusive education has become a central focus of global and national educational reforms to ensure equitable access to quality education for all children, including Children with Special Needs (CWSN). India has a number of legislative and policy documents with detailed provisions for inclusive education such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, National Education Policy, 2020 and Samagra Shiksha. However, the ways in which these policy commitments have been realized in effective classroom practice and how they have been realized in the context of a geographically diverse state like Assam, is not sufficiently explored. In view of this, the present study critically explores the policy framework for inclusive education of CWSN in Assam and examines the implementation of inclusive education in Assam under the Samagra Shiksha, challenges involved in strengthening inclusive education and possible ways to overcome them. The study is a descriptive type of research in which only secondary data from government policy documents, programme guidelines, UDISE+ reports, UNESCO publications and peer-reviewed literature were analyzed. The findings show that interventions like early identification, using resource teachers, providing assistive devices, home-based education, and teacher capacity building have had a positive impact on inclusive education, there are still considerable challenges. They include the lack of trained special educators, lack of barrier-free infrastructure, geographical limitations, lack of access to assistive technologies, and lack of institutional coordination. The study concludes that context responsive planning, building institutional capacity, ongoing professional learning, evidence-based monitoring, and inter-sectoral collaboration are required to close the policy–practice gap. The findings add to the policy discourse and provide some practical suggestions in the context of promoting equitable and sustainable inclusive education in Assam and other socio-geographically diverse states of India.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Children with Special Needs (CWSN); Samagra Shiksha; Policy-Practice Gap; National Education Policy 2020.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has come to be considered an integral part of the current educational systems, which focuses on fair access to learning opportunities, participation and quality learning for all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, sensory or developmental differences. India has made a significant push towards achieving educational inclusion through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), the National Education Policy (2020), and Samagra Shiksha, all of which are guided by international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) (United Nations, 2006), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Rights), and Sustainable Development Goal 4. Although these forward-looking policy efforts face difficulties in being effectively implemented in the classroom, especially in geographically diverse states like Assam, they are still crucial for progress. In this background, the present study critically analyses the policy framework, implementation and challenges of inclusive education for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in Assam and suggests evidence-based strategies for promoting inclusive education in Assam.

1.1 Meaning of Inclusive Education:

Inclusive education is one of the keys of twentieth-century educational reforms, representing a worldwide commitment to providing equal access to quality education for all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or cultural differences. Current inclusive education defines disability not as an individual limitation but as a right; it views diversity as an educational resource and seeks to remove barriers to participation and learning. UNESCO states that the principle of inclusion is that every learner matters equally and that education systems are designed to overcome barriers to participation, rather than attempt to adapt the learner to the system. This principle is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2020).

1.2 Concept of CWSN:

The term 'Children with Special Needs' (CWSN) is used generally to describe children who need extra educational supports due to physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, behavioural or multiple disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, in the Indian context, expanded the definition of disability from seven to twenty-one categories, thus significantly increasing the number of people who are entitled to educational support and reasonable accommodation. Inclusive education in India is not just about school enrolment but also includes curriculum adaptation, assistive technologies, individual educational planning, accessible infrastructure, teacher preparedness and constant academic support to help children with disabilities participate in mainstream schools (Ministry of Education).

1.3 Importance of Inclusive Education:

Inclusive education is not just about learners' achievement in education but social and economic development as well. Disability inclusion in the classroom supports social cohesion, decreases discrimination and promotes peer acceptance and equal opportunities for all. Studies from various countries around the world have shown that inclusive education is beneficial to the academic performance,

social skills, empathy and democratic participation of both children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Inclusion should not be considered only an educational intervention but as a vehicle for achieving social justice, educational equity and human rights. UNESCO also claims that exclusion is usually caused by systemic barriers in the educational system, not by the disability of the learners, and thus calls for a system-wide approach to reforms instead of targeted remedial actions (UNESCO, 2020).

1.4 Inclusive Education in Global perspective:

Internationally, the development of inclusive education has been supported by a number of key international declarations such as the Salamanca Statement (1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), and the Education 2030 Framework for Action. They each support institutional change to create inclusive schools that can accommodate learner diversity in their curricula, learning environments and pedagogical approaches. Despite significant progress in policies, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report has repeatedly pointed to the situation where millions of children with disabilities are still excluded because of lack of infrastructure and inadequate training of teachers, insufficient financial investment, and the overall attitude of society. One of the primary issues that continue to face inclusive education globally is the gap between policy goals and classroom practice (UNESCO, 2020).

1.5 Inclusive Education in Indian perspective:

The legislative and policy thrust towards inclusive education has been strengthened over the years in India, for example, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (PWD Act, 2016), and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Overall, these reforms support equal access, participation, flexibility, pedagogy and services for CWSN. From an operation perspective, Samagra Shiksha is the main implementing body, incorporating the development of primary and secondary schools, financial and technical assistance for the identification and assessment of disabilities, the provision of assistive devices, barrier-free infrastructure, therapeutic interventions, teacher training and home-based education for children with severe disabilities, and community awareness programmes. The scheme is a major change in tack from a welfare perspective to a rights-based approach to educational inclusion.

Table 1. Evolution of Inclusive Education Policies in India

Year	Policy/Legislation	Major Provision	Relevance to CWSN
1994	Salamanca Statement	Inclusive Schools	Global Commitment
1995	PWD Act	Educational Rights	Beginning of Inclusion
2009	RTE Act	Free Elementary Education	Neighbourhood Schooling
2016	RPWD Act	21 Disability Categories	Inclusive Education Rights
2020	NEP 2020	Universal Inclusion	Whole-school Approach
2021 onwards	Samagra Shiksha	Implementation Mechanism	Support Services

1.6 Inclusive Education in the Assam context:

Even with this strong policy framework, the evidence gathered from the national and state level reports show that the implementation of policy commitments is not uniform in the classroom in India. Lack of trained special educators, school infrastructure that is not accessible, school learning materials that are not inclusive, assistive technologies, early identification systems, school monitoring systems and inter-departmental coordination are still challenges. This means that inclusive education is often policy and not practice, and is implemented in very different ways in different geographical and socio-economic settings. In recent reviews the teacher preparedness and capacity of institutions are also cited as continuing challenges in achieving the objectives mentioned in NEP 2020 (Samagra Shiksha Axom, n.d.).

1.7 Significance the study:

The focus of this policy-practice relationship is especially pertinent in the context of the state of Assam. Assam is a state with significant geographical diversity, frequent floods, remote rural settlements, tea garden communities, riverine (char) settlements and socio-cultural diversity, which presents unique challenges for equitable access to education for CWSN. The state has taken several steps, such as early identification and assessment, provision of assistive devices, home-based education, barrier-free provision, teacher training, and education support for the curriculum, under Samagra Shiksha Axom. Detailed processes are also set out for identifying and assessing a student's disability, adapting the curriculum, ongoing assessment, and specialized materials. The contribution these policy provisions have made to district-to-district educational consistency, however, has not been well studied in depth using secondary evidence (Samagra Shiksha Axom, n.d.).

2. Review of Literature:

Over time, the language of inclusive education has evolved from a focus on welfare to a rights-based approach that emphasizes equal participation, meaningful learning, and social inclusion for all students. It was in the Salamanca Statement that mainstream schools with an inclusive approach were identified as the best way to help reduce discrimination and build inclusive societies (UNESCO, 1994). This philosophy was reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which stated that inclusive education should be considered a fundamental human right and not a discretionary educational provision (United Nations, 2006). More recently, UNESCO has suggested that the emphasis on inclusion must not be limited to enrollment in the school but extend to school systems that are restructured to ensure that curricula are accessible to student diversity, teachers are trained to engage with students as their peers, and school environments are conducive to the learning process (UNESCO, 2020).

International experience has consistently demonstrated that inclusive education necessitates a systemic approach rather than mere individual interventions. This objective can be attained by identifying and addressing barriers to inclusion using the Index for Inclusion (Ainscow, M., & Booth, T., 2002). Likewise, Ainscow (2005) argued that inclusive education must change the institutional culture, policy, and classroom interventions rather than children adapting to the existing educational system, and that education systems need to be restructured based on equity and social justice. (Slee, R., 2011) further criticized the narrow-mindedness of disability approaches that belong to a deficit model and stated that

the system of education must be restructured based on equity and social justice. The studies taken together indicate that the effectiveness of inclusive education is not only based on interventions for people with special educational needs and disabilities but is also dependent on policy coherence, institutional commitment, teacher preparedness, and community participation.

However, experience in each country around the world shows that there is a long-standing divide between policy intentions and policy implementation. While the majority of countries have developed inclusive education policies, their implementation remains hindered by insufficient funding, unsuitable infrastructure, teacher training, low political will, and negative social attitudes (UNESCO, 2020), the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report noted. Learner diversity must not be a problem but an asset to learning, and the report suggests extensive changes in governance, curriculum, teacher education, and assessment systems to ensure SDG 4.

Inclusive education in the Indian context has been the subject of increasing research from legal and policy perspectives. The Government of India has already introduced the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, both of which have increased the category of disabilities from seven to twenty-one and strengthened the mandate of schools to make reasonable accommodations and offer inclusive education facilities. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 gave another boost to inclusive education by emphasizing equity and inclusivity through flexible curricula, assistive technology, cross-disability teacher training, resource centres, and universal accessibility for children with special needs (Government of India, 2020). These changes all help shift the focus of inclusive education from a welfare program to an education rights perspective.

These policies are translated to the ground through Samagra Shiksha, a measure that brings together both elementary and secondary education and includes early identification of children with special needs, resource teachers, home-based education, assistive devices, barrier-free infrastructure, therapeutic services, teacher capacity building, and inclusive classroom practices (Ministry of Education, 2021). While existing assessments suggest that Samagra Shiksha has significantly enhanced access to education and institutional support for children with disabilities, there are still differentials in terms of teacher availability, accessibility norms, quality of support services, and monitoring across states.

Teacher preparedness is an identified factor for successful inclusion in several national studies. Despite the positive laws, social attitudes and institutional preparedness are still a constraint on inclusive education in India, claimed (Ghai, A., 2015). Likewise, Singal (2019) noted that there has been a significant increase in policy commitments, but classroom practices have been rooted in traditional models of special education due to inadequate practical training in inclusive pedagogy for teachers. It has also been found that lack of cooperation between regular teachers, special educators, parents, and community members hinders the success of an inclusive education programme (Singal, N., 2019).

The UNESCO State of the Education Report 2019: Children with Disabilities pointed out the continuing educational inequalities faced by children with disabilities in India. A significant number of children with disabilities did not attend school or left school due to lack of infrastructure, teacher support, social stigma, and institutional coordination, the report said. It recommended better combining the Right to Education

Act with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, increased funding, better training for teachers, and strong monitoring systems to make sure inclusive education works well (UNESCO, 2019).

3. Research Gap:

Based on a review of the literature, we have identified the following three important gaps. following three important gaps A review of the literature reveals three important gaps. The literature review identifies three important gaps. Firstly, there is a lack of studies that consider aspects of inclusive education, such as teachers' perceptions or infrastructure, by incorporating policy analysis and implementation evidence. Secondly, few studies integrate government documents, Samagra Shiksha reports, UDISE+ data, and contemporary research to assess policy implementation in Assam. Third, there has been little attention paid to the policy–practice gap in the context of the post-NEP 2020. In response to these gaps, the present study critically reviews the secondary evidence to analyze the policy framework of inclusive education for children with special needs in Assam, assess the level of implementation of Samagra Shiksha, and draw out evidence-based strategies to strengthen inclusive education in Assam.

4. Research Objectives:

- i. To examine the policy framework governing inclusive education for CWSN in Assam.
- ii. To critically review the implementation of inclusive education under Samagra Shiksha.
- iii. To identify major implementation challenges and to suggest strategies for strengthening inclusive education in Assam.

5. Research Methodology:

This study is a qualitative descriptive research design, which is based only on secondary data. The study aims to critically analyze the policy framework, implementation, and challenges of inclusive education for children with special needs (CWSN) in Assam. Secondary information has been collected from authentic national and state-level sources such as the National Education Policy (2020), the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), the Samagra Shiksha Framework for Implementation, Samagra Shiksha Axom reports, UDISE+ reports, NCERT, UNESCO, UNICEF, and relevant peer-reviewed journal articles.

Document analysis and thematic content analysis are used in the study to highlight the evolution of inclusive education policy and its implementation as Samagra Shiksha in Assam to find out policy–practice gaps. Official reports and scholarly literature were systematically reviewed, categorized, and synthesized based on the study goals. An analytical approach was used to analyze policy provisions, implementation strategies, and emerging challenges and make recommendations for strengthening inclusive education in Assam based on the evidence. This approach is suitable for developing in-depth policy knowledge and understanding where there is a wealth of high-quality secondary data available (Bowen, G. A., 2009).

6. Discussions & Results:

6.1 Policy Framework Governing Inclusive Education for CWSN in Assam:

The policy framework for inclusive education of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in Assam rests on an interwoven network of international commitments, national laws, educational policies, and implementation mechanisms at the state level. In the current educational policy, disability is not considered charity or welfare but as a basic human right and an integral part of equitable and quality education, and inclusive education is considered a child's right. This framework has evolved as a move away from segregated education towards a rights-based approach that prioritises equal participation, access, reasonable accommodation, and educational equality (United Nations, 2006) (UNESCO, 2020).

The international framework of inclusive education began with the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, which called upon schools to welcome all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). Emphasis was placed on the role of ordinary schools and an inclusive school orientation as the most effective instruments to combat discriminatory attitudes and promote education for all. Later, in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), inclusive education was declared as a legally protected human right, and all the signatory countries, including India, were bound to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the mainstream education system and are provided with appropriate support in mainstream schools (United Nations, 2006). These international commitments have had significant impacts on India's educational reforms as related to disability inclusion.

The constitutional provision of equality and educational justice is the basis of inclusive education in India. Article 21A provides for free and compulsory education for all children aged six to fourteen and, through articles 14, 15, and 46, prohibits discrimination and advocates equality in education for disadvantaged groups (Government of India, 2009). These constitutional provisions are universal; however, they form the legal foundation for educational inclusion as education becomes a right and not a privilege.

One of the significant steps towards strengthening inclusive education was the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act in 2009, which institutionalized universal education at the elementary level and emphasized equity of access for all children. The Act originally had some measures relating to disabilities, but later amendments and interpretations by courts have extended its reach so that children with disabilities have a right to free and compulsory education in neighbourhood schools with their peers, where possible (Government of India, 2009). It is, therefore, necessary to note that inclusion was not a parallel educational system but was a part of universal education in the elementary stage as established by the RTE Act.

The enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, has been one of the most important policy advances in disability-inclusive education in India, significantly reinforcing the legislative framework. The RPWD Act superseded the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995, which had included only seven disabilities, and allowed for 21 different disabilities to be recognized, making inclusive education a legal obligation for educational institutions. In line with Section 16 of the Act, governments and educational institutions must provide reasonable accommodation, barrier-free access, individualized support measures, suitable learning materials, trained teachers, assistive technologies, and appropriate assessment mechanisms to facilitate children with disabilities to participate effectively in

mainstream education (Government of India, 2016). The Act, therefore, transformed educational policy in a more holistic direction towards a policy of inclusion rather than integration, in line with international human rights norms.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also reinforces this commitment, with a clear focus on equitable and inclusive education as one of the key pillars of the educational transformation in India. The policy is based on the principle that children with disabilities, socio-economic disadvantages, geographical location, gender, or language should have access to education. Some of the key principles of NEP 2020 for establishing learner-centered, inclusive classrooms are creating universal access, flexible curricular adaptation, assistive technologies, accessible infrastructure, inclusive pedagogy, early identification of disabilities, multidisciplinary support services, and continuous professional development of teachers (Government of India, 2020). NEP 2020 treats disability inclusion as a cross-cutting issue that educational institutions, health services, local communities, and social welfare agencies must address. The overall strategy of the education reforms in India is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4: inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2020).

The Government of India primarily implements these national policy commitments through its main program for school education, Samagra Shiksha. The Government of India primarily carries out the implementation of these national policy commitments through its flagship program for school education, Samagra Shiksha. The Government of India primarily implements these national policy commitments through its flagship program, Samagra Shiksha, which is a comprehensive education system covering pre-primary to senior secondary levels that was introduced in 2018 and incorporates the National Policy on Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education schemes. In this model inclusive education is an explicit intervention aimed at children with special needs (Ministry of Education, 2021). The program will offer financial and technical support for disability identification and assessment, medical camps, the deployment of resource teachers, home-based education for children with severe disabilities, provision of assistive devices, therapeutic interventions, transportation allowances, stipend support, barrier-free infrastructure, Braille and large-print books, and inclusive teaching-learning materials, as well as teacher capacity-building programs. The framework also highlights the importance of community engagement, parental involvement, and regular checks to promote learning and participation as well as inclusion beyond the point of entry (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Samagra Shiksha Axom is the main state body coordinating the implementation of inclusive education, implementing the provisions of the national policy in Assam at the district level through education programs. The state has a comprehensive set of guidelines for identification, educational assessment, enrolment drives, individualized educational support, the deployment of special educators, the distribution of assistive devices, home-based education, therapeutic services, and regular teacher training. Special emphasis is placed on early identification via medical assessment camps and on providing resource support for children with severe disabilities and on developing collaboration between schools, health systems, parents, and communities (Samagra Shiksha Axom, 2023).

But inclusive education in Assam remains ineffective without the effective implementation of inclusive education policies in the classroom. Existing evidence shows that policy provisions are largely consistent with international standards; however, the implementation is unevenly distributed among districts based on geographical diversity, recurrent floods, transportation challenges, lack of trained special educators,

lack of infrastructure, and differences in institutions' capacity (UNESCO, 2019). Therefore, understanding the policy framework alone is insufficient; it is crucial to examine the policy implementation to determine whether the commitment to the policy is effectively providing equitable educational opportunities for children with special needs in Assam.

6.2 Implementation of Inclusive Education under Samagra Shiksha:

The implementation of inclusive education for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in India is mostly through the Samagra Shiksha, the integrated school education programme introduced in 2018, amalgamation of erstwhile Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education (TE) schemes. The programme aims to promote equitable access to quality education through integration of CWSN in mainstream schools, along with individual academic and support services and interventions. Samagra Shiksha applies a rights-based approach, which is more than just physical enrolment, and prioritises the access, participation, learning achievement, and social inclusion of children and young people, with the focus on these rights in line with the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and the National Education Policy (2020) (Government of India, 2020) (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Samagra Shiksha Axom is the nodal agency in Assam for implementation of inclusive education at district level. The screening camps carried out in cooperation with health departments and health care professionals are an important part of identification and assessment of CWSN early in the process of implementation. After being assessed and certified as disabled, eligible children are placed in their neighbourhood schools or receive home-based education services depending on the level of their disabilities. Early identification allows for timely intervention, individual educational planning and access to government support service (UNESCO, 2019).

The programme also focuses on the use of Inclusive Education Resource Teachers (IERTs) and special educators for classroom inclusion. These professionals support regular teachers in adapting curriculum and planning for individual students, making assessment adjustments, counselling parents, and monitoring student progress. They work together to make the connection between policy provisions and classroom practices. Research, however, suggests the quality of inclusive education remains impacted by the lack of highly qualified special educators and inequitable distribution of special educators throughout districts, especially in rural areas (UNESCO, 2020) (Singal, N., 2019).

Barrier free school infrastructure is an important intervention under Samagra Shiksha. Funds are available for ramps, accessible toilets, accessible classrooms, tactile pathways and other accommodations that enhance physical access for children with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2021). While infrastructural development has been carried out in many government schools in Assam, accessibility in tea-garden, flood-prone, and riverine (char) schools is not uniform, and the geographical conditions and poor maintenance of these schools prevent effective implementation (Sheikh, S. A, 2025).

The programme also facilitates CWSN by providing them with assistive devices, learning material such as Braille books, hearing aids, wheelchairs, low vision devices and other learning materials depending on their needs. These interventions increase mobility, communication, participation in the classroom and independent learning. The focus on bringing assistive and digital technology into the inclusive classroom has also been growing in accordance with the recommendations of NEP 2020. Still, studies have shown

that in some districts, the procurement of AT and its use is slow, and not all AT is put to good use, which continues to limit educational achievement (Government of India, 2020) (UNESCO, 2019).

Capacity building of teachers is another key component of implementation. Samagra Shiksha conducts regular training programs on topics such as including pedagogy, differentiated pedagogy, classroom management, disability awareness and alternative assessment techniques. The programs are designed to provide teachers with the abilities necessary to meet the needs of a variety of learners in mainstream classrooms. Even with these, various studies indicate that many teachers still need to continuously learn and develop their practical skills and confidence in using inclusive pedagogical strategies effectively (Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K., 2011).

Home Based Education (HBE) is offered for children who have severe or multiple disabilities and are not attending school regularly. In this program, the trained resource teachers come out to the learners' homes to provide one-on-one tutoring, track progress, and assist families with learning activities. Home Based Education works alongside formal education to allow for continuity of education and a progressive transition to mainstream education, where practical (Samagra Shiksha Axom, 2023).

Monitoring and evaluation are done based on school records, UDISE+ review and regular field inspections to check enrolment, retention, infrastructure, service delivery etc. These mechanisms facilitate evidence-based planning and programme improvement, but implementation has been hampered by issues of data quality, monitoring efficiency and inter-departmental coordination (Department of School Education and Literacy, 2023; UNESCO, 2020).

In general, the efforts towards implementation of inclusive education under Samagra Shiksha has resulted in enhanced educational opportunities for CWSN in Assam through early identification, provision of resources, use of assistive technologies, teacher training, home schooling and good infrastructure. But, significant differences between districts suggest that policy intentions are all-encompassing, but they are not uniformly implemented in schools. The challenges faced in the implementation of inclusive education highlight the importance of improving institutional capacity building, ensuring equity in resource allocation and ongoing monitoring to achieve inclusive education goals in the state.

6.2 Implementation Challenges and Strategies:

Whilst the policy regime for inclusive education in India is progressive and comprehensive, there remain various issues related to the effective implementation of the policy, especially in a state with geographical, socio-economic and infrastructural diversity like Assam. Policy-making to classroom implementation should not only be supported by legislation, but also be accompanied with sufficient resources such as financial, human resources, infrastructure, institutional coordination, and community involvement. Samagra Shiksha Axom has made significant strides in the identification and provision of resources, teacher deployment and assistive services for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) but a number of implementation barriers exist that impact the quality, access and sustainability of inclusive education. Reports from the country and internationally consistently state that inclusive education is only possible when educational systems can eliminate the institutional barriers rather than require children to conform to institutional constraints (UNESCO, 2020) (Government of India, 2020). Such barriers are compounded in Assam by regular flooding, riverine (char) communities far away from the urban centres, tea-garden communities, dispersed settlements and different educational facilities in various districts. Therefore, an

in-depth review of these implementation issues is vital to inform evidence-based interventions that can support inclusive education to be strengthened across the state.

6.3.1 Major Implementation Challenges:

- i. **Shortage of trained special educators:** One of the major limitations is that of inadequacy of trained special educators and Inclusive Education Resource Teachers (IERTs). The deployment of resource teachers has been mandated in the National Policy on Education, but in some districts, the ratio of teacher to student is still not adequate even after Samagra Shiksha has been implemented. While inclusive education has gained increasing importance in the mainstream curriculum in recent years, classroom teachers are rarely provided with extensive practice or in-service training in inclusive pedagogy, curriculum adaptation, and disability-specific instructional approaches (Singal, N., 2019) (Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K., 2011).
- ii. **Inadequate barrier-free infrastructure:** While the government has committed to supporting school accessibility, many schools still do not have basic features like ramps, accessible toilets, tactile pathways, resource rooms or classroom modifications. Geographical conditions, maintenance limitations, etc. make infrastructure development difficult, especially in rural areas, tea-garden areas, and char areas (Sheikh, S. A., 2025).
- iii. **Geographical and environmental barriers:** Assam's distinct geographical and environmental features have an impact on inclusive education. School attendance, transportation and continuity of education and care are often affected by seasonal flooding, river erosion, remote hill regions and the distribution of riverine settlements. Children with mobility disabilities are adversely affected as a result of lack of transport and mobility. Children with mobility disabilities are disproportionately impacted because of limited transportation and mobility (Assam School Education Project, 2025).
- iv. **Limited availability of assistive technologies:** Assistive devices are distributed as a component of Samagra Shiksha, but a number of studies show that there are delays in the procurement, maintenance, replacement and effective use of assistive technologies. There is a lack of digital assistive technologies, accessible learning software, Braille resources, communication devices and other instruments that can enable students with various disabilities (UNESCO, 2019).
- v. **Weak teacher preparedness and professional development:** There are still many teacher-training programmes which focus primarily on theory and lack practical application in the classroom. As a result, teachers often express dissatisfaction in their abilities regarding differentiated instruction, individualized education planning, classroom management, and inclusive assessment approaches (Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K., 2011) (Singal, N., 2019).
- vi. **Administrative and monitoring challenges:** Effective coordination between the education, health-care and social welfare departments is essential for effective implementation. However, the gaps in disability data and in its monitoring, delayed fund use and institutional coordination issues reduce the effectiveness of programmes. There are uneven monitoring systems at the district level in Assam .

- vii. **Social attitudes and parental awareness:** There are negative perceptions of disability in society that persist in some communities, which hinder some children from participating in education. Parents might be reluctant to send children to school due to discrimination in mainstream schools, lack of awareness of available services and stigma. Community sensitization is thus an integral part of being successful in the inclusion process (UNESCO, 2020) (Ghai, A., 2015).

6.3.2 Strategies for Strengthening Inclusive Education in Assam:

The above challenges can only be tackled through multi-sectoral interventions by policy, education, community and development actors. The following strategies could be critical for augmenting inclusive education in Assam.

- i. **Improve recruitment and professional development:** The Government shall give more attention to the recruitment of qualified Special Educators and Inclusive Education Resource Teachers, especially in the areas that need them the most. CP programme should focus on classroom skills related to the practical application, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, behaviour management and individualised planning, and not just on short-term orientation programmes (Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K., 2011).
- ii. **Enhance the school environment for accessibility:** Priority should be placed on fully accessible schools, which should include accessible classrooms, ramps, tactile pathways, resource rooms, accessible playgrounds and accessible sanitation facilities. The geographical aspects of flood prone and char areas should be taken into consideration in infrastructure planning with a relevant and resilient approach (Ministry of Education, 2021).
- iii. **Expand assistive and digital technologies:** The State should increase the use of assistive devices in the procurement, maintenance and effective use, and expand access to digital learning technology, screen reading software, Braille software, augmentative communication devices and accessible educational applications. A "technological integration" can promote independent learning and class participation for CWSN to a large extent (Government of India, 2020).
- iv. **Strengthen inter-departmental coordination:** Inclusive of greater collaboration between the Departments of Education, Health, Social Justice, Women and Child Development and local administration for the early identification, certification as a disabled person, provision of rehabilitation services, counselling and regular education support. The convergence of institutional structures would improve the provision of services and shorten implementation time (UNESCO, 2019).
- v. **Improve monitoring and evidence-based planning:** There should be increased regular monitoring, through UDISE+, school-level performance indicators, district inclusion indices and independent programme evaluations. Good education statistics will help to improve planning, allocation of resources in an equitable way, and the timely implementation of policy measures, especially in the educationally less-favoured districts.
- vi. **Promote community participation and awareness:** Parental involvement and participation of School Management Committees (SMCs), local self-governance bodies, non-governmental organizations and community leaders is seen as a way of strengthening inclusive education. Awareness campaigns should aim at mitigating stigma, promoting early enrolment and positive attitudes towards disability and inclusive education (Ghai, A., 2015).

- vii. **Develop district specific implementation strategies:** Uniform implementation approaches may not be able to meet the needs of districts due to geographical diversity in Assam. Greater financial resources, special personnel, mobile education, flexible education arrangements should be provided to address areas of education vulnerability, such as char areas, tea-garden communities, flood-prone areas, etc. as deemed by district education planning (Samagra Shiksha Axom, 2023).

Table 6.1. Summary of Challenges and Recommended Strategies

Major Challenge	Suggested Strategy
Shortage of special educators	Recruit more IERTs and strengthen continuous professional development
Inadequate infrastructure	Develop fully accessible, climate-resilient schools
Geographical barriers	District-specific planning and mobile educational support
Limited assistive technology	Expand digital and assistive learning resources
Weak teacher preparedness	Practical training in inclusive pedagogy and UDL
Administrative coordination	Strengthen convergence among departments
Social stigma	Community awareness and parental engagement
Weak monitoring	Improve UDISE+, district inclusion indicators, and periodic evaluations

Source: Secondary Sources; compiled by the Researcher

To summarize, the policy framework for inclusive education, such as Samagra Shiksha, along with the relevant legislations, has been set in place in Assam. Yet there is a continuing lack of implementation of the necessary adjustments to achieve equality in education opportunities for CWSN. Building teacher capacity, upgrading infrastructure, using assistive technologies, building institutional coordination and district planning appropriately to context are key to bridging the policy–practice divide. Increased investments in these areas will not only enhance the access and participation to educational services but will also help in attaining the broader objectives of education equity as articulated in NEP 2020 and SDG 4.

7. Conclusion:

The concept of Inclusive Education has grown from the perspectives of welfare to one of the rights of children and for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) to learn equally with other children, thereby all children have equal rights to learn. The present study was aimed at critically analysing the policy, implementation of inclusive education in Assam under Samagra Shiksha, and the major challenges which are still playing a significant role in the process of inclusive education. The review shows that the Government of India has put in place a wide array of legal and policy frameworks, including the Right of

Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), the National Education Policy (2020), and Samagra Shiksha which all contribute to inclusive and equitable schooling.

The study also shows that significant efforts have been made in the field of education for CWSN in Assam through early identification, deployment of CWSN teachers, home based education, assistive devices, training of teachers and building infrastructure. However, implementation of these policy intentions and commitments is not consistent across districts. Poor coordination between departments, lack of consistent monitoring, high level of staff shortages (particularly special educators), poor infrastructure, limited assistive technologies, geographical constraints (flood prone and riverine areas), and inadequate infrastructure (no barrier-free) remain the key challenges for inclusive education. The results in this report point to a big policy–practice disconnect, in that policy alone will not be effective unless there is enough institutional capacity and local planning.

The study recommends a multi-faceted and context-specific approach to strengthen inclusive education in Assam, which includes regular teacher professional development, building facilities that are accessible to all, using technology to facilitate learning, conducting regular monitoring based on evidence and support of inter-institutional, inter-departmental, family, and community collaboration. To assess educational outcomes, learner experiences and institutional effectiveness, future research is needed that will build on secondary evidence through district-level empirical research. This will help create more responsive policies and practices that help to achieve SDG 4 and make inclusive education a reality for every Assamese child.

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